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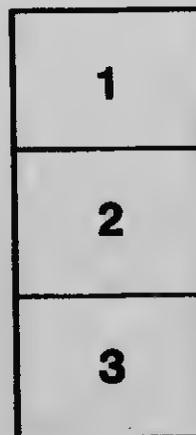
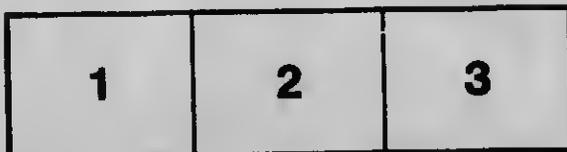
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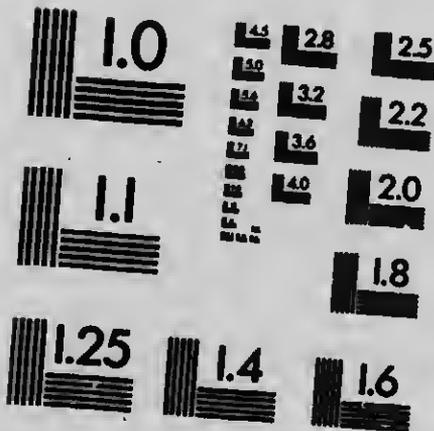
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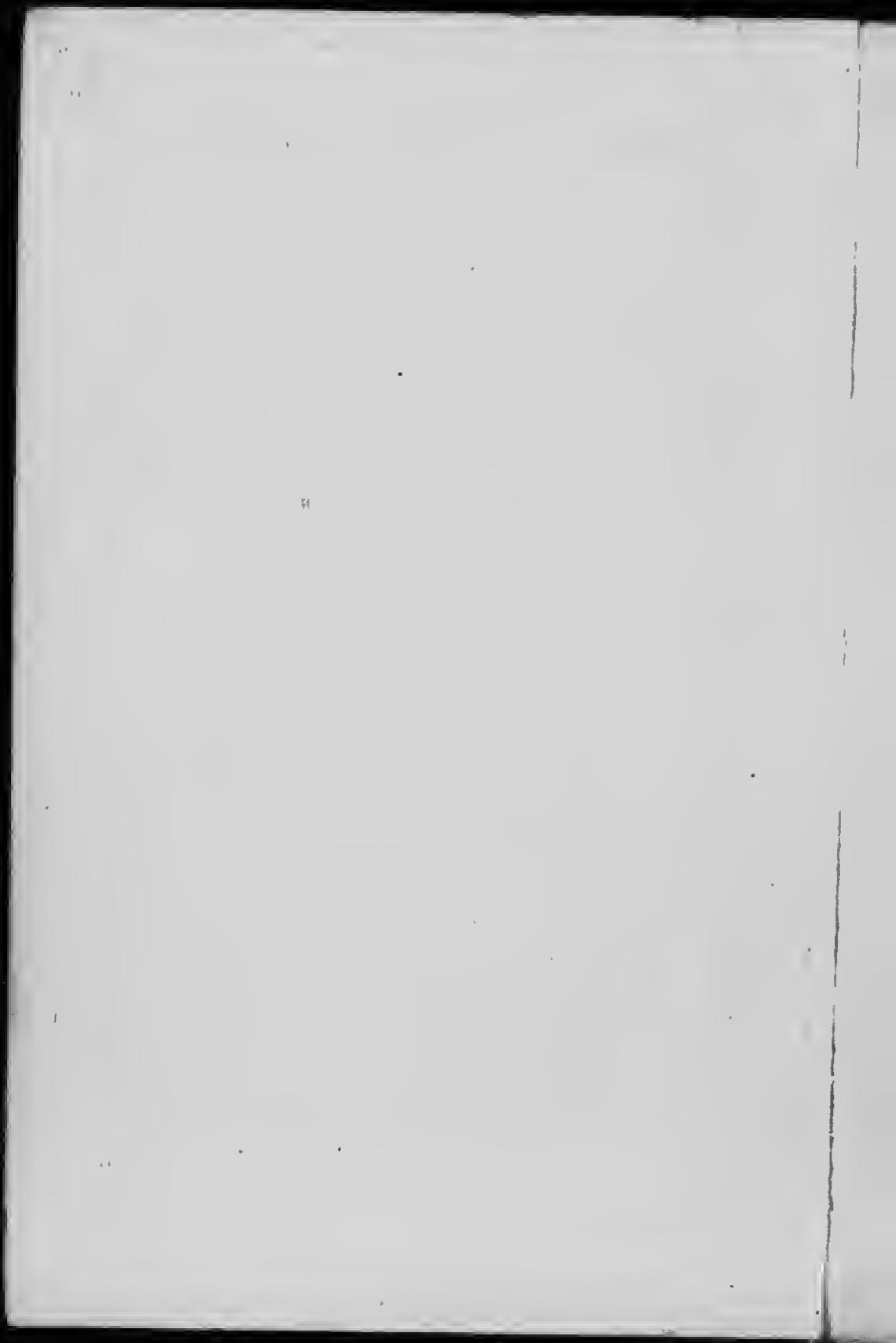
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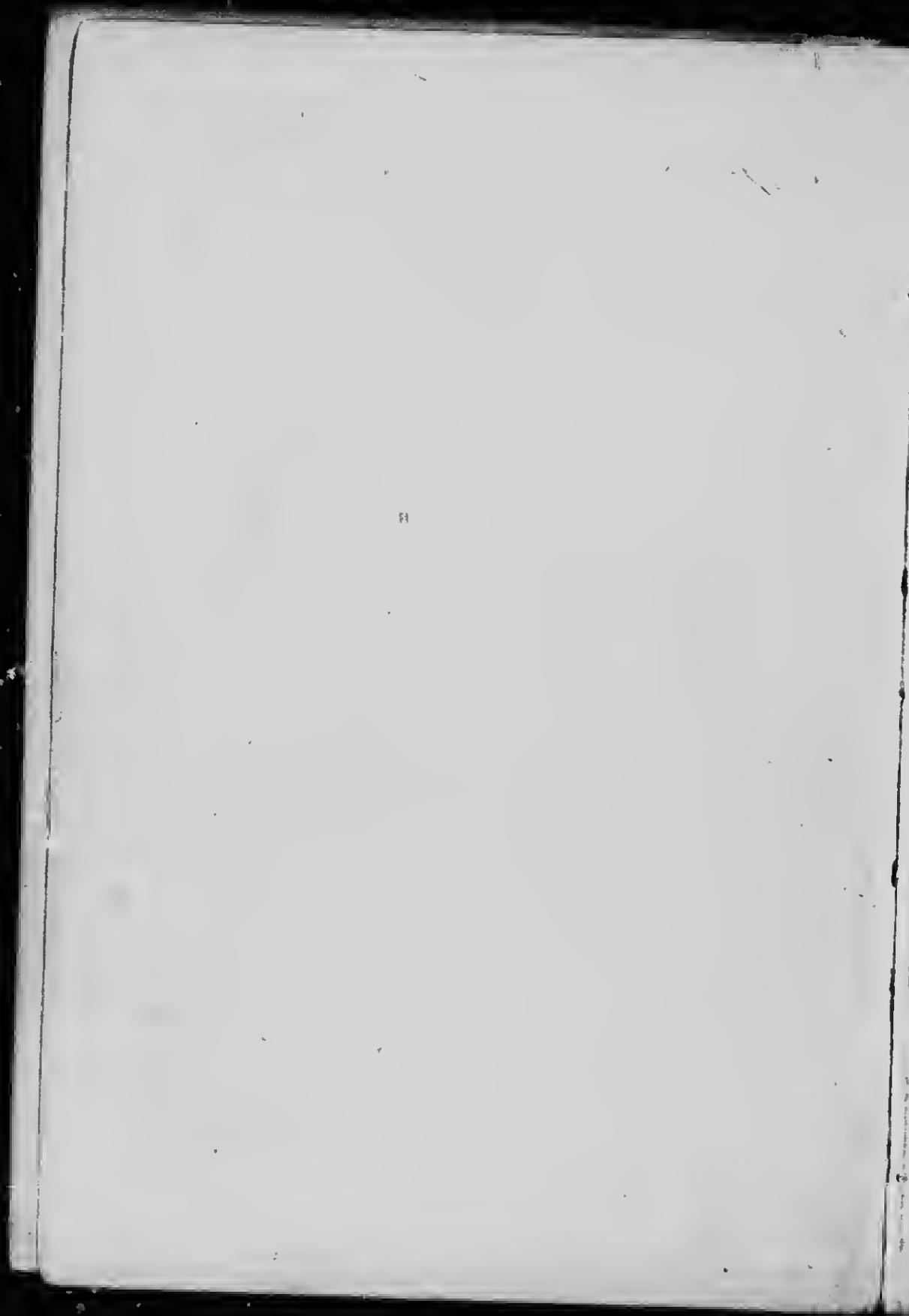
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**THE STRONGEST**



# THE STRONGEST

## CHAPTER I

**H**ENRI LEPASTRE, Marquis de Puymaufray, led the great rout of the last years of the Second Empire brilliantly. His duels, his adventures in gallantry, made him famous at Longchamps, in the châteaux, at the theatres. They were very jolly days, as one of the heroes of the occasion said, and Henri de Puymaufray was at the height of the carnival of folly. When the outraged virtue of the sentimental Germans broke up the carnival with shell fire Henri de Puymaufray went to the front as dashingly as to a rendezvous, returned with his arm in a sling, and refused to be consoled. He said that his generation had done too much evil to take pride in the common courage of resisting the invader.

"Of course I am a hero," he replied whenever people tried to flatter him, "but I am a hero of a defeat. Ribbons, and pieces in the paper, and the whole parade that goes with them will not console me for my country's loss—for which we are to blame. What is the slash of a bayonet compared with other wounds that will never close over?"

## THE STRONGEST

They thought him queer. "The war struck home to him," said his friends. And since he was ruined, in any case, and had retired to what was left of his estate, they decided that he had gone under, and . . . good-night!

Henri de Puymafray's father—one-time gentleman in waiting to Charles X, a lover of white wine and pretty country girls—was killed in a hunting accident before he knew that he was to have an heir. His mother, née Pannetier, a stupid, ugly creature, daughter of an army contractor, died three days after the birth of the child. She had perpetuated the race—had gilded again, for a day, the escutcheon sorely soiled by time. And, having accomplished the full duty of a plebeian millionaire, she took her place hierarchically in the tombs of the Puymafrays, who forgave the misalliance. A seedy old uncle, of the noble side, was named guardian and then tutor for the little marquis. He sulked at the coming of the child, who ruined all his own senile hopes, but he established himself at the château with an abbé from the bishopric of Nantes, and with the two Nanettes, his childhood nurse and her little daughter.

Fourteen uneventful years. The child grew up, loved by his nurse, whipped by the abbé, consoled by his little foster sister, and lectured by his tutor.

In spite of his appearance—the crooked nose, the rolling, yellow eyes, and the gold-headed cane he

was always twirling, the chevalier de Vertprée was not malicious. Misery and pride of race had made him stingy, and he got so much satisfaction from his miserly administration of the Pannetier millions that he eventually forgave his nephew for his untimely birth. He even grew to like the boy, after his fashion, and once, between two games of bezique, conceived the idea of making a real gentleman of him. He discussed the project seriously with the abbé.

"Monsieur le Chevalier," the abbé would say, "there's only one thing to do. We will make our young marquis a perfect God-fearing Christian—a man who will serve the Church and do his duty faithfully to those whom Heaven has placed under him, and who will fight with fire and sword all those disturbers that flourish in our unhappy day, when heresy is no longer a crime."

"Your game is bad, my dear abbé, but you know what you are saying. Only, while you take care of his soul, I have to insure the honour and pride of a race which, before God, owes fealty to the Throne and to the Altar. You will form the spirit of the child; I, his heart. So long as you won't fill his mind with the impious trash of science, I will take care of the rest."

Then they would quarrel about tricks and count their points all over again.

The abbé fell in with his partner's ideas perfectly.

He knew nothing whatever of what the chevalier called "the filthy mess of the scientists." He knew as much Latin, geography, and history as a priest needed to know, and had some ideas about mythology. Whatever inclination toward learning the child had was overcome by this martinet, and Henri turned willingly toward the system of education preached by his uncle.

"Henri, my child," he would say, fiddling with his useless spectacles, "you are the Marquis de Puy-maufray. Few can say that much. Every day I am increasing your property. Your first duty is to preserve it. You promise me to preserve it?"

Henri, deeply moved, promised with a nod of his head.

"Good. When you have the château, which we will restore some day, and the farm lands and the pastures, you will not have to worry about anything except defending yourself against the mistakes of your time."

The devious turns of this speech were difficult for Henri's dozen years, but at "the mistakes of your time" he pricked up his ears. He knew what was coming; questions and answers and a long litany of the things that no one need know.

"The men of to-day want to know everything. They are blasphemers, they are revolutionists. They're bandits. Now, Henri, you don't like bandits, do you?"

Henri's little head signified an energetic No.

"Very good. The abbé has told you how our first parents were tempted with the fruit of the tree of knowledge. We are still tempted. We must resist." (Henri made the appropriate gesture of resistance.) "Good. When you know your catechism you know all you can know. Do you need to worry about books?"

"Oh, no," Henri answered.

"Or bother about gas, or thermometers? What do you care for steamboats and locomotives and all the rest of those noisy, evil-smelling machines? So! Be a good child; serve God; love your neighbour; be grateful to your uncle, who is making you a Christian gentleman; and respectful to the abbé, who is teaching you innocent if useless things. Then I will be pleased with you. Now come and kiss me."

But Henri remained at a respectful distance from both the abbé and his uncle. His world of kindness and love was in Nanette, the mother who fondled him and brooded over him and adored him.

The Breton woman is sentimental, fixed and wholehearted in her devotion. The story of Nanette is told in the words: she loved. She loved Henri with the perfect passion of those who give themselves without getting, with the joy of contributing to some indistinct Puymaufroy of the future, whose gestures would be the pride of history. Her own daughter was subordinate to this enterprise, and the

humble nurse bent all before her by the tranquil energy of her ideal. The chevalier hesitated to cross her, and the abbé surrendered at once, dazed by the authority with which she spoke of the will of God.

Until Henri was fourteen years old his life was happy with his "sister" Nanette, with the farmers in the fields, with the blacksmith at his forge, the shoemaker at work on his wooden shoes—all of them masters of the secrets of earth. The universe enchanted him. Then the abbé persuaded his uncle that four years with the Jesuits at Poitiers was indispensable to the education of a gentleman. The parting from the two Nanettes was cruel, and they consoled each other only with pledges of eternal affection.

The good Fathers found the soul of Henri quietly closed against them. In the depths of his heart the elder Nanette had laid the treasure of which she alone held the key. The masters, zealous enough, gradually lost interest in a pupil who would not have to pass examinations and left Henri to browse, haphazard, in the new world of books. He asked questions, learned things, and acquired a passable culture.

He had just reached his eighteenth year when his uncle died. The day after the funeral a family council was held in the great hall of the château. It turned into a monologue delivered by a little, painted old lady who looked like a crab-apple, shook her

long black mittens with an air of authority, and spoke in a voice like a broken harpsichord.

"Henri, my child, we are assembled to fulfil in every respect our duties toward the noble house of Puymaufroy. The hour has come to make a grave decision. It is time for you to know that your family has had its misfortunes as well as its grandeur. From the day when one of your ancestors saved the life of King Philippe-Auguste, according to an oral tradition which I hereby transmit to you, all your forbears have been soldiers. Why was it necessary for one of them to be deaf to the voice of honour and to soil his name with a stain I would gladly wash out with my own blood? I cannot give my blood. It is for you to redeem the glory of the house of Puymaufroy."

Henri, impressed by the solemn prologue, deeply troubled by this unexpected revelation of a stain on his name, listened without understanding. The word "redeem" gave him a clue. He had heard his uncle and the abbé discuss the fortune inherited through the Pannetiers. The abbé had denounced these rapidly accumulated millions as tainted money, gained in the service of the usurper or stolen from the Church. He had heard his uncle say that "some day Henri will redeem it . . . or won't." The words suddenly came to life in his memory.

"Aunt Des Tremblayes," he cried, impetuously, flushing to the roots of his hair, "you are right. We

must make restitution. If there is anything against my grandfather Pannetier I do not want his money. If any of the rest was stolen money I refuse to take it."

The little old lady jumped from her chair as if stung. "What is this madness, nephew, and what are you talking about? However sad your father's marriage was, it was justified by the necessity for restoring the Puymaufrays to their proper station in society. I do not know what fables have been told you about M. Pannetier (de Nogent) whom I knew in his old age, a God-fearing man. What I alluded to was the deplorable error of your paternal ancestor, Jean de Puymaufray, who lived here, without protest, all through the execrable revolution, giving the appearance of justice to the assassination of the King, the persecutions of the priests, the bloody violence against the members of his own order."

Henri breathed again.

"Now you know all. Without question you share my indignation. You cannot serve the Throne while the King of France is in exile. But the Holy See is safe. Rally to it. We have anticipated your desires. You are accepted as a Zouave. Here are your letters of introduction and a draft on the bank. You will start to-morrow."

Henri saw only one thing: no more Jesuits at Poitiers. Youth—and the unknown—tempted him.

"I am ready," he said, simply.

A flattering murmur greeted his words.

The next day he was en route, lightheartedly leaving the Nanettes one of whom he was never to see again.

Because he lacked sufficient preparation to understand it, Rome did not affect him. What he knew of antiquity seemed out of place among those old yellow stones whose meaning and history escaped him. He understood that something colossal had existed there, an enormously developed will-to-rule to which the Church was the natural heir. Religion would undoubtedly have appeared nobler to him if he had not seen the Vatican so close. All the gods have need of distance. Besides Pius IX, the sacred idol of distant crowds, Mgr. de Mérode, prelate and minister of war—trying out a new litter in the Zouaves' camp, hanging his cassock on the pack saddle and travelling around on a mule like a wounded man—evoked sentiments quite different from those of the faithful kneeling for the pontifical blessing.

The Zouave society was mixed. In addition to a crowd of bullies from every country there were Irishmen, Canadians, Belgians, brought to camp by a sincere exaltation for the faith. Occasionally they had a scrap. Between times they kept themselves amused. The beautiful Roman girls were not indifferent to the French.

The young man was snatched from his pleasures by the letter which informed him of the death of

Nanette. With her last words she commanded her daughter to care for M. Henri, to watch over and protect him. The girl gave her promise, tearfully.

Henri wept for his foster mother. Wearied, sceptical, disillusioned, he stayed on until his four years were over and then came up to the imperial festivities of Paris.

What could he do in Paris except what the gay youth of his time were doing? In six years the wealth of the Pannetiers was redeemed, as the abbé had advised; or, rather, it was restored to the nation, not by pious gifts, but with the aid of certain ladies of the theatres, jockeys, shopkeepers, moneylenders, whose useful function it is to prevent the excessive accumulation of capital.

This act of social levelling was the inevitable result of a life to which all the channels of useful activity were closed. To live for his money seemed to Puy-maufray to be the stupidest thing in the world. And for what employment had he been prepared? He threw himself head first into the adventure of vulgar pleasures. He gained no very high opinion of himself, but he consoled himself more or less by his scorn for his fellow men and women. He mortgaged and then sold his estates, without regret.

He was well-nigh ruined and was beginning to cast discreet glances at French and American heiresses when, in the midst of his bitterest vituperations of women, he was caught in a tempest of passion which

uprooted him and stamped upon him, and, by force of suffering, brought forth the man whom education and the dead weight of circumstance had plunged deep into the recesses of his soul, unseen by himself.

On the *pelouse* at Longchamps, on the day of the Grand Prix, Henri had met an old friend, Dominic Harlé of Poitiers, who, after a brilliant career at school, was building an important paper factory at Radegonde, near the Puymaufray estate.

The two men had never shown any lively interest in each other. Harlé had been a grind, a dull, stupid soul, with a marvellous head for mathematics, the pride of the good Fathers, while the other, rebellious against the effort of learning, had gapingly followed the flies up the wall, dreaming, in his prison, of rustic pleasures with Nanette and the abbé. The proximity of the château and the factory would naturally have brought together the idle master of the one, careless of the wealth he had flung away, and the hard-working, practical master of the other, for whom the name of Puymaufray seemed to possess exceptional importance.

So far from each other at first, the two men suddenly became friends by a mutual feeling that their destinies were joined, and rapidly flung a bridge of reminiscences between the dark paths of Poitiers and the brilliant tumult of Longchamps. A distant cousin of Harlé's, canon of Tours and in good standing in the archbishopric, had found the necessary

capital for him. The Jesuit Fathers, who could not lose sight of so promising a pupil, had married him prosperously, as he briefly said.

"Unfortunately," he concluded, "the Fathers could not have foreseen the failure of the Catholic Bank of Canada, brought about by the fraudulent tricks of the London and Paris Jews, and I only laid my hands once on the 100,000 francs which I was supposed to get every year. My father-in-law died of grief after some rather painful scenes between us; my wife has become sulky, peevish, unbearable; and I am cheated. Life isn't always amusing at Rade-gonde, and that's why I sometimes run up to Paris to forget my work and my burdens."

With the help of the Marquis, and in gay company, Dominic easily forgot his troubles that day. The blasé Parisian, weary of Paris, got some amusement from the fresh debauchery of the provincial who had broken loose. It was not enough, however, to shake off his growing horror of the unvarying joys in the emptiness where his life was spent. The eternal beginning over again, at the same times, the same places, with the same conventional people, slaves to the same idols of pleasure, became odious to him. He was by nature capable of other pleasures but incapable of making the effort. The Englishman, in such conditions, travels or kills himself for new sensations. The German gets drunk on beer and tobacco. The Frenchman, a brilliant, empty shell,

remains passive, the plaything of the elements, in the inertia of slow dissolution. A sad spectacle, this Paris crowd of brilliant surfaces without a deeper life, tossed haphazard, shaken with false movements which give the illusion of life. Worn-out sensations, tarnished sentiments, dead ideas: the triumph of appearances, the prestige of Lies.

Some time later Henri was calling on the notary at Radegonde in order to sign some bills of sale and invited himself to lunch with the manufacturer. Mme. Harlé astonished him, less by the cold regularity of her features than by her haughty melancholy, as of royalty dethroned. Did her husband say sulky, peevish? Nothing of the sort. But it was clear that the catastrophe had left the traces of an irreparable unhappiness on this wounded soul.

However cruel it may be, the loss of money cannot draw young lips into so bitter a line. Regret for a loved father would have caused more abandon, and not these suppressed tremors of revolt. The shaken, wounded voice echoed sorrow. And yet the sweet courtesy of her greeting, the strained but affable smile, gave gentleness and harmony to the authority of her dominant grace. Slender, supple, beautiful with a lifeless beauty, her head high and imperious under its crown of ash-coloured hair, Claire Harlé baffled the charmed gaze by her simple air of one who has been beaten. What could be read in the trans-

parent depths of those green eyes flecked with gold? Puymaufray's searchings were lost in the impenetrable mirror that took and held his gaze.

The conversation was dull, embarrassed. The Parisian found himself awkward, lacking dash and wit. It was the provincial, still warm with his experiences of Paris, who was eloquent and gay. He made no effort to conceal the fact that he had but one interest in life, his factory, which was beginning to prosper. He spoke of his great plans for the future. And then, after a silence:

"All that would be ready now if it weren't for . . . those who crippled me at one blow."

Mme. Harlé made no gesture of surprise at this brutal reminder of her father's misfortunes. A flash of red passed over her pale face and presently she left the room as if to give some instructions, and did not return.

"It's always this way," cried Dominic. "I wish someone would tell me which of us two is the sufferer. How can my mind be free for my work when I'm always being harried by the provocations of a nervous woman?"

"But aren't you provoking her deliberately and uselessly?" asked Henri, timidly.

"That's exactly what *she* says. But you can understand *me*. What did I want from marriage? What everyone wants, eh?—to better myself personally. And what did I get? I'm worse off, be-

cause of these eternal fetters on my work. I admit that that isn't entirely my wife's fault, and I have too much breeding to reproach her continually for her father's ruin and the hardly honourable failure to live up to agreements signed before a notary. But after all, what am I but the commander of an industrial army, risking my life and my honour on the field of combat? Here I am in the thick of it, compelled to make quick decisions, to do things irrevocably. How can I remain master of my faculties and calm my jumpy nerves when, right at the crisis, the decisive forces slip away from their appointed place? If I could suppress a cry, a rough gesture, at that moment, I would be an angel perhaps, but not the captain of industry I am proud to be."

Puymaufroy said nothing. He looked at this violent fighter, implacably obsessed by his purpose, and his brutality, so cruel and shocking in the enchanting light of a pair of green eyes, seemed explainable if not excusable.

Black hair *en brosse*, a stiff beard, outlining the energetic, harsh features, jerky gestures, a vibrant voice, all indicated the master of the fierce poetry of action. His wife, thought Henri, is of another world of sensations and suggestions; that is the misfortune.

"No doubt there's your side," he hazarded, timidly, "but there is also your wife's. She has the right to a full development of her own life, just as you have."

"My wife? What do you imagine I can get from her? I wanted something secure to rest upon: the dowry is gone. Nothing remains but the burden of a useless, perturbing woman, with the misfortune of having missed her duty in life, resenting faults which she attributes to me in order to console herself a little for the lack of foresight of her own people."

"You have your home."

"Yes. That's what people say. Bachelors. Talk to me about home. Here. Take a look at that huge smokestack out there. *That's my home.*"

The next day Henri let Nanette persuade him that his presence at Puymaufray was necessary for supervising urgent repairs to the château. Soon he was treading the path to Radegonde every day. Perhaps paper-making interested him; perhaps it was Claire Harlé who, after a pretence at indifference, slowly relented and, in the end, yielded to the charm of his sincerely surrendered heart. He was attracted by her and neither desired nor dreamed of anything more. He was driven out of his usual self, happy in a new ecstasy, and, forgetting all his arts of seduction, became strong by virtue of truth alone.

In the hum of the factory or the silence of the fields Claire let herself be drawn into long talks. At first Dominic tried to share their walks, but the factory called him. Moreover, the tension of these two spirits, drawn toward each other, seeking each other

by obscure and devious ways, made it tiresome for him to follow.

"Who would have thought that Paris would make you a poet of the fields?" he would say to Henri. "That's the punishment for idleness. Instead of going into ecstasies over an oak tree, get into the stream of action in the world, turn back your cuffs, make me a roll of paper out of this tree, bring up your ignorant workers to some conception of industry, increase the substance of mortal man: these are worth more than plain living and high thinking."

"It's true I've stupidly wasted my life," replied Henri. "It might have been good and useful. Only, the sort of thing you call action isn't the only action. Your paper isn't worth anything except for the ideas which the spirit of man prints on it. You are an agent, a middleman, not a master. It's the ecstasy of the world, at which you are laughing, which explains you and justifies you. From it come, day by day, the sensations that move men, and the maker of paper even—you have confessed it—is moved by a feeling for art."

"And is it from the great life of Paris, as M. Harlé calls it, that you bring back this philosophy?"

"No, madame. I found it here—too late. I lived stupidly with the empty gestures of my class, the sad remnants of a vanished glory. I am forty years old. Whatever is left of my strength is useless for any purpose. I have lost my fortune and my

youth, and here I am, a peasant, just where I began. But at least I know the things I could not do."

He was thinking his thoughts out for the first time. A new soul was being born in him and expressed itself in changed accents, in new gestures, which gave the young woman the delicious pleasure of recognizing something she was herself creating.

Rapidly her instinctive defence against him broke down. She gave him her confidence. She told him of her care-free youth in a convent, where complete ignorance of the world was systematically and obstinately worked out; of her invalid mother and her father, engrossed in business; of the surprise of her marriage at nineteen and her acceptance of it with the assurance that all human happiness lay therein.

"Really," she asked, "what more could our parents do for us if they were our bitterest enemies? When I think of the lies at school and at home, falsifying our souls and corrupting our hearts, I wonder that we have any sincerity and honesty left. Tell me, where are the beautiful things we are taught about the family and society? It seems we are to discover the Higher Will in them. Then why do I see, instead of the advertised beauties, nothing but a battlefield in which the desires of the strongest triumph? I know that everyone says we are to be rewarded in heaven. Then show me those who are really trying to live up to that belief."

"I will not try. I will only tell you that the evil world of which you are the victim leaves you a refuge in yourself. Brutality overwhelms you. But isn't it your revenge to feel within yourself a power stronger than what struck you down? And if it is your lot to meet a heart in which yours can expand, if your strength doubles itself in its capacity for living, do you not believe that out of your unhappiness a joy on earth can come which will be greater than the ecstasies of heaven?"

"Yes. That is how I thought about marriage. But society had other views. My money and I were riveted to each other. There was a magnetic attraction between my money and M. Harlé's money. That was enough. I had to follow. The misfortune is that one day the money disappeared and the woman remained, face to face with the irritable master you know. After a year of frivolity my husband suddenly dropped the mask. There was no further need for finesse. His violence broke out into gross reproaches against my father, who died of despair. That was life's beginning for me . . . at twenty. I am twenty-five now. I am older than you are."

"No. No. Because I find you in the full revolt of youth. And are you sure that all this misfortune may not be of benefit to you? Without it you would have continued your life of worldly pleasures. What would it have done to you? I could show you

what it has done to others. Suffering has given you a soul."

"And what is it to me? I suffer more, that's all. You say I am in revolt. It is only talk. I am hopeless, and the current carries me——"

"Who knows? Perhaps your trials are nearing their end."

"Yes, I understand. You are here. It is much for me to be able to speak as I have just spoken. But you know well that there is nothing that can come of it. I am not made for falsehood, and you can only offer me a change of miseries."

Ever their thoughts returned, to break against the invincible obstacle. Henri would say to himself: "It is impossible; it can never be."

And Claire thought: "The world, which struck me down with the first blow, doesn't want to see me raise myself again." And then in the depths of her heart a voice murmured: "Why not?"

Alas! she could not tell everything. She could not confess the bitterest torture, her horror of infidelity, born of sickening experience, of suffering, which shamed her even while she hated it.

Henri knew enough. He had become timid, fearful of breaking into the consolation which came to him merely through living. He had said before: "The most beautiful moment of love is when I climb the stairs." Was that his love now? By what name could he call this impetuous burst of feeling

which tortured him until the full satisfaction of their meeting? He loved and expected nothing beyond the delight of his love. Expecting nothing, he foresaw no danger, and both of them were lured by their security until their hearts had yielded completely.

Unconsciously they let themselves talk of friendship, of love—unconstrained, incapable, undesirous of holding themselves in check. Each in the bottom of the soul had decided that they could live chastely near each other, united by a sublime love. Thus they pledged each other one night; softly, proud of their ecstatic sufferings, drunk with their heavenly flight. They swore, their hands clasped, their eyes lost. And when they awoke from their trance, Nature had reasserted her rights. They were no longer mystic lovers, but man and wife.

They were not frightened; they were justified by the inevitable. From that moment they neither asked nor promised, abandoning themselves to Fate, which seemed to shelter them under her wing. Was happiness that magic talisman of Oriental tales which rendered the possessor invisible? The unhappy console themselves by showing their miseries. But supreme felicity shuns display, indifferent to the indifferent world. Only the social Law has fixed the rigid forms under which happiness may be enjoyed.

In their delirium, Henri and Claire forgot the law. At first the question of breaking the veil of hypoc-

risy and of belonging openly to each other did not occur. Dominic was wholly absorbed in his work. His wife's indifference calmed him; he sensed a vague desire for reconciliation and ascribed it to the influence of his friend, whom he was glad to see permanently settled at Puymaufray. He himself was too busy with new developments in the factory, making up what he had lost through the failure of his father-in-law. Occasional trips to Paris were his only diversion.

He had come home from one of these trips when the family physician, Dr. Archambaud, took him aside and said:

"My dear fellow, I have good news for you. According to all symptoms, your wife is bearing a child. I haven't told her so outright, yet, because I wanted to leave you the pleasure of confirming her hopes. Congratulations."

The thought had never occurred to Dominic, who cried out, "It's impossible, doctor."

"Excuse me. It must be possible, because it is true."

"And I say No. Wait——"

He tried to recall the time when he found himself before a certain closed door which would not open to his entreaties and his threats. At last he conceded:

"Oh, well, if it's so, it's so." And he rushed into his wife's room to congratulate her.

When, later, Claire and the doctor were alone, the doctor suddenly saw what had escaped him before. When Claire burst into tears, he said: "Do not cry. I understand my mistake. Trust me. I will arrange everything."

Dazed by the event, she was not surprised. "Go to Puymaufray," she murmured. "Tell Henri that I didn't know. I thought my fears were groundless. Now, what can I do? Nothing can be changed. Our child must be born under this roof. Henri must be generous, compassionate, and resigned to the inevitable."

Archambaud kept his word. Puymaufray was constrained to submit, for Claire's life was at stake. The doctor succeeded in deceiving Harlé, and when the child was born she was accepted without question. Henri de Puymaufray took the child to the font where she was registered as the daughter of Dominic Harlé and Claire Mornand, his wife.

Harlé was in the fulness of his self-development and was devoting his soul and his will to the business of production. He would have been proud to have an heir for his dynasty; now his hopes went out to the son-in-law he would have. Henri, a failure, Claire powerless, were far away from him.

However, a new life took possession of the lovers, who were belittled by falsehood, but made great by the child. With their renascent life came love. They had no thought except to live by and with each

other. But the most beautiful sentiments must be translated into action, into everyday movements, and must be realized by activity in full daylight. The legal setting for love—which can serve to conceal every shade of emotion, from indifference to hate, leaving love aside—has at least the advantage that it gives both parties the attitude of apparent frankness. Lacking that, Claire and Henri had given themselves to each other too completely not to feel wounded by the brutal lie. Man resigns himself to these constraints more easily than woman. What could Puymafray do as he dreamed in the desolate solitude of his hearth while she whom he called his wife watched over the crib of little Claudia? She sought the absent husband, encountered the eyes of the other one, the usurper who was also a victim, and whose every movement toward the child was false. But Henri suffered, humiliated as by an evil act, an evil which he did and which fell back upon him.

Claire at least was absorbed by her duty as a mother, and suffered above all by the sacrifice which she imposed on him whose love saved her from herself. Sorrow and joy in one, love dominates all with its sovereign power, greater in suffering than in its ecstasy.

When their first dizziness had passed they were both astonished to find in themselves a power greater than love. "How small a thing was my love,"

said Claire, "when I gave myself to you. I was only living for myself, and I asked nothing of you except to forget my misfortunes. That was yesterday and now it appears so far away. In these few months how my whole being has been renewed by your generosity."

"And what shall I say—I who, in saving you, first found out how to salvage my wasted life? I gave you my hand, but it was you who drew me from the abyss," said Henri.

"Why, say that from our two defeated lives we have created a power for victory. What was I? A wreck lost in common wreckage as you were lost in vulgar catastrophes. I owe it to you that I have weathered the storm."

"And I, I owe it to you that I am alive again. The world, which struck you down at the first encounter, corrupted me until all my power of reaction was lost, and then came your eyes and I was saved. And I see and marvel at what was hidden from me: the misery of mankind and the sovereign solace of love. I am conscious of the strength you have given me, and my love is more beautiful than the selfish joy of living. It will somehow give back to you and to our child something of the soul which you have given to me, so that some of your gentleness may come to those who suffer on earth."

"My friend," replied Claire, "what I gave you was already yours. Does the spark come from the

flint or from the steel? From the encounter. The encounter is the miracle. The miracle is perhaps greater if it is the eternal energy scattered in the world which concentrates itself in us and by the flash of the infinite ecstasy which leaps from our souls make us divine for a day."

"I knew well enough it was a miracle when I lost myself in your eyes. I saw mysterious lights flickering there. And then a flame burst out and shone and dazzled, and I knew that an unheard-of thing was coming to pass."

"The flint and the steel, I tell you. Two separate lives suddenly fused to appease our mortal misfortune by the inexhaustible felicity of love. What a wager against Fate! Can we dare to say that the miracle would have come to pass that you would have understood me and loved me if you had met me before I was tried by my sorrows and you deceived by your joys? And do you think that I would freely have chosen you when I came from the convent?—and even if I had done it, would I have been the woman I ought to be for you if I had not suffered?"

"And yet," ventured Henri, "in spite of everything I am afraid. We have no remorse for the present nor jealousy of the past. But don't you feel as if there hung over us some fatality in the future?"

"I don't know," sighed Claire. "I thought I was dead to everything when I really hadn't been born

to anything. Now I can see. Let Fate present the bill. I will pay cheerfully."

"Yes, the charity given off by our love makes us see our goodness reflected everywhere, and we say: 'I'll pay'—like a debtor who is counting on the indulgence of his creditors. You say that you will not pay too much for happiness. Do you mean even if you paid for it with the loss of happiness?"

"I cannot lose it. Once I have had it, I have the memory forever. I have had and still have enough happiness to lull my sorrows, which do not come from you, and unshaken love defies the Fates."

"But love," said Henri, tenderly, "that includes our child, in whom our love prolongs itself."

"Ah well, and sha'n't we struggle for the sake of our child? Shall we not accept for Claudia, and with her, the last resort, which we did not dare to accept for each other—I mean exile? Let us live. That is the only price we have been asked to pay until now. Say that you are willing to pay——"

Indeed all they had to do was to live. This payment, which seems easy, does not come without its cruel surprises.

Dominic was not at all a jealous father, and his first acts of authority over the child were naturally tempered by the sovereign desires of the mother. But already it was clear that the legal power was not on the distaff side and that a powerful will was applying itself to arrange everything in Claudia's

soul to prepare her for the destiny which he was planning for his own advantage, the selfish ambition of a master. There was a decisive difference between what he wanted and what they wanted who drew their authority from life itself, whose sole object was the completest and most beautiful development of the soul of the child, for her own sake and through her for those she might eventually help. At first this divergence of purpose was more a sorrowful fear than a real wound. And besides, Claire was there. That was enough.

Six years of happiness, six eternities, six flashes of lightning for the day of reckoning. The creditor who presented himself was Death.

In three days Claire, flourishing in more than human beauty, strong with a limitless passion for life, reflecting in the luminous depths of her eyes the divine joy of things, was laid rigid and cold in the coffin where all human pleasures come to an end. It happened that Dominic was in Norway on business. Henri, incapable of playing a part, would have completed the misery by some act of madness.

Three days, of which every minute was to remain graven in each fibre of his being; three days of unspeakable torture in the deceptions of hope; three days of heroic combat which ended in the inevitable defeat.

In the delirium of death Claire repeated one prayer:

"Henri, Henri—you must live. I want you to. You must live for me, for Claudia!"

To the last breath the blanched lips murmured: "Live."

And the invocation to life ended only when death sealed the lips of Claire Mornand, wife of Puymauf-ray.

Grief has no words, the heart no sobbing for irreparable disasters. The consoling peace of the tomb is the temptation for helpless weakness. Henri did not think of dying, for he felt himself already dead.

He was shaken with a terrible start when he was told that Dominic was coming home. It was too much. He felt that he must leave. Without consulting him Nanette took him at once to Milan where he had spent some lovely days in a brief flight with Claire. The atrium of St. Ambrose, where once he had dreamed, hand in hand with Claire, gave him a twinge of pain which suddenly broke out in a burst of tears. Each day he came to cry there and to find his life again in the solace of tears.

One day Nanette decided that the time had come, and said simply: "There's little Claudia."

"I know," said Henri. "I am ready. Let us start."

At six Claudia could not be melancholy, and in her mourning clothes she seemed smiling and gay

at the arrival of her "uncle." It was a bitter blow for his sorrowing heart; nor was it the last.

An odd little creature, good hearted, playful, she treated Henri with bursts of affection and with disconcerting brusquerie. Puymaufray, shaken with his eternal sorrow, sought the dead woman in this frail spirit whose flower was growing on the ruins of his world. Haunted by the idea that he must live for Claudia because that was living for Claire, he accepted the torture of continuing life in order to continue his love, to make her who was dead live again in the living child.

In the mobile face of the child he discovered traces of the sweet gravity of her mother. He gave these resemblances authority, ingeniously re-created attitudes, expressions, tones of the voice, and stubbornly attempted to resurrect what was dead.

Her eyes—her eyes, above all—were a sharp, continual torment to him. Titian's Caterina Cornaro in Florence has eyes so strangely coloured that innumerable copyists, furiously at work before the immutable canvas, make the eyes a gray or blue or brown. When you are close to them the play of changing light colours them with indefinable tints. Such were Claudia's eyes, fugitive of definition. The arrow of her gaze sped from the slender bow of her eyebrows. There was nothing of the tranquil serenity of her mother's look. They gave no resting place for confidence, no repose. And yet, in the

changing iris there were at times flashes of green with which Claire's spirit seemed to tremble into life. Henri feverishly looked out for these flashes and fell back at once into the night of darkness. But even in the dark the possessing light of the dead shone in him with the indomitable power of love. He felt her moving, saw her, obstinately tried to bring her back from the beyond in the child of her body and of her heart. It was the eternal ecstasy and the eternal torture of a life devoted to the effort of making a dream come true.

Puymaufroy made Claudia love him because he loved her, only to find Dominic already installed in her soul, the legal father arrayed against the legitimate pretender.

Dominic was soon consoled, and thought of and lived by the factory alone. Claudia was only one card in his hand, and not the lowest. She was the bait for the aristocratic marriage which was to crown his life of labour. Harlé wanted to prepare everything for this high future, to arrange everything in her spirit, and every detail of her education was planned by him for his own purposes.

He had to discuss his ambitions, and made Henri his confidant; twisting the dagger by endless observations in which the child appeared only as a tool for his own greatness. In vain Henri protested that the child had a will of her own, a personality.

"I am considering that," answered the manu-

facturer. "You will see whether I can work human pulp as well as paper pulp."

Puymaufroy felt the chill as of a sword-blade pass through him into Claire's heart. He was shaken by a fury: to defend, at all cost, his daughter, his love, the dead woman who was coming to life, against this infamous enterprise. At whatever disadvantage, he must fight. Love would be stronger than the lies of the world. The tortured father grew crafty in his tricks to save his daughter from *the other one*.

Harlé had to be managed first. Henri applied himself, tried to gain his confidence. Dominic sensed his weakness and took advantage of it. However, the friendship of the Marquis de Puymaufroy was by no means a negligible factor in Harlé's plans for the future. So, occasionally, he made concessions to the "prejudices" of his friend, but he never yielded in anything essential.

After something of a tussle he agreed to renounce the social advantages of a convent school, but Henri, to whom the very thought of separation was like death, saw a governess straight from the hands of the Jesuits installed instead. This lady, duly fortified with parental authority, at once began to foment a revolt against "your godfather's notions." The "notions" were to open the child's heart to truth, goodness, pity—to sentiments of human compassion from which the impulse to give aid might spring.

Harlé's desire was to make "his daughter" a power for his use.

There is an art of using the words "devotion" and "sacrifice" so that they call up emotions quite distinct from those that they should connote. What is more banal than the exhortation to be charitable?—and what action is more rare than disinterested help, given without hope of heavenly recompense or worldly praise? Organized charity, of Church or State, subjecting each and all to the prevailing formula, becomes an excuse for ferocious egotism, freed from all restraint. Henri tried to arm the child against the lessons of these realities. But he came up against the development of her self—instinctive at first and, later, encouraged by class education.

Claudia listened to the discussions of which she was the object. People all said the same thing, but the practical conclusions were so different.

No one expressly advised her to be indifferent to the miseries of others. The seed of selfishness needs no cultivation. "Be good, Claudy; love your fellow-men who suffer while all the joys of the world are prepared for you," she was told. But what could be the effect of these words when she was forever seeing miseries that could be alleviated, but which no one made any effort to alleviate? A curt word of refusal, spoken in the hurry of life; a gesture of disgust with the sordid beings from another world; the common cry, "I can't help everyone," which

often expresses lack of will, not lack of capacity, to help; these sink deep into the attentive soul of a child.

In spite of her childish understanding Claudia felt that there was a power over her. Her "godfather," whom she loved, used to speak to her of her mother, whose name no one else mentioned in her presence. At the same time he made her feel vaguely that he was a spirit tensely resisting the rest of the world. "The rest of the world" was her governess, Mme. Marie-Thérèse, with her sugared flattery, and Harlé, redoubtable to others but prodigal to her with eternal seductions for her vanity.

Puymaufray watched her grow, and finding more and more of the mother in the child, waited for the time when she could reason.

"It was suffering," he told himself, "which forged Claire's soul. And there will be plenty of suffering here."

He forgot that for their hazardous miracle Claire and he had both been required; he for his love, she for her rebellion against the vulgar gifts of the world.

Claudia Harlé, a young girl now, conscious of her beauty and wealth, looked down from a height upon the world. Happy to be alive, proud of her life, she took possession of the world and loved it as it was, since she was happy in it. She went to Paris often with Mme. Marie-Thérèse and her father. While she was gone Henri lived in a trance. And inevitably the return to Radegonde was a bitter sur-

prise to him. But how could he complain of the joys of twenty? Would he not alienate forever the heart he was trying to conquer and to protect?

Visits, dancing parties, innocent remarks of depravity with which precocious youth amuses itself; the theatre, with its sometimes risqué commentaries; the good Fathers with their benign advice, all shared Claudia's happy life. To her, all these things seemed, and really were, of a miraculous unity. Her "godfather" alone was off key. From time to time a brief note from his daughter startled him, wounded him, by a word innocently dropped, tormented him and made him despair of the extravagances which he, the too expert Parisian, understood all too well. Sometimes he ran up to Paris, "to share their pleasures," in the suffering of a life which had been flung from its orbit.

Harlé was not afraid to take his daughter to the house of the beautiful Comtesse de Fourchamps, née Billaud, who, with twenty thousand francs income by her marriage contract, enjoyed—even while her husband was alive—more than a hundred thousand francs through friendship with the famous Baron Oppert. At Puymaufroy's first objections Harlé nailed him with one word.

"My daughter meets your relatives, your friends—the finest families in France—there. There isn't a more respectable salon in Paris."

It was true.

## CHAPTER II

**P**UYMAUFRAYS'S face was whipped by the wind as he rode into the battle. The hedges, the trees, and stones along his way spoke to him of Claire. She had passed there. "Soon it will be my turn," he said to himself, "each passing hour is a step toward peace."

He drew rein in the huge park, and the imitation grottos and dreary waterfalls disgusted him, although they had passed unseen before. Now he was shocked, for his misfortune had brought him back to the common feelings of humanity.

"Good morning, Uncle," cried a gay voice from the steps. "I was just having them hitch up the pony to come and have lunch with you."

"The old folk are getting ahead of the young nowadays," he answered, laughing, softening the reproach with a huge kiss.

"Papa is at the factory and doesn't want to be disturbed. Suppose we go down to St. Aubin. We've got two hours ahead of us."

"Let's. I'm ready."

Claudia was charming in her little fur toque; a blue jacket and a straight skirt set off her adolescent

figure, and had it not been for the excessively Parisian face she would have seemed charmingly young and quietly elegant.

"What are we going to do at St. Aubin?" said Henri, after vainly trying to reconcile himself to something harsh in Claudia's youthful face.

"We're going to see a farmer's boy who had his fingers cut off in the sawmill yesterday."

"I suppose he's had everything done for him already?"

"Oh, I'm sure Papa's looked after everything. These people would not lack for anything. They are very pious."

"And if they weren't pious?"

"Then they'd only get what the law allows. Papa wants everyone to go to church."

"And what do you think of all that?"

"Oh, me? I'd go to see them of my own accord just as I'm going to-day, because they're in trouble. However, I understand Papa. People need religion."

"His religion, exactly?"

"Oh, his! He does his duty. That's enough. We don't ask more of any one."

"Well, I thought that religion was the doing of good—something more than appearing in the temple—and I never saw compulsory religion do anything more than make a decoration for deceit."

"I am not capable of discussing that with you, Uncle. All I know is that God has created two

classes of people, the rich and the poor. And we ought to see that our inferiors practise the religion that teaches them to submit to the trial of life."

"Why it might be Dominic himself talking. He is one of the superiors, he is, and so he consoles himself with the trials of others."

"Why, Uncle Henri, you're not going to criticize Papa, are you? He is very good—and so are you."

"And so are you, and everybody. It's a pity that with all this goodness there's so much unhappiness on earth."

"There isn't so much as you say, Uncle. Do you think that the people that work in the factory are unhappy? Papa gives them work to do and lets them earn their living."

"They give him something in return, too, don't they?"

"Well, of course; because we're on the side of the 'superiors'. And besides, Papa works, too—a lot. You're an anarchist, Uncle; that's what you are. To hear you talk, no one would ever guess that you were once a Zouave for the Pope."

"I wasn't of my own accord, child."

They had struck off from the main road and gone down a path that was frozen over. The earth, powdered with hoar-frost, was closed against all living things, hiding under its icy mantle the mystery of the birth of the future. There is a poetry of

winter, healthier and more germane to the strength of man than the torpor of the summer. It is a time of ungrateful struggles against the elements, a time of suffering, but what strength in the knowledge that victory comes at the end! Henri spoke of it to Claudia, who cheerfully decided that that proved that everything was for the best on earth.

She marvelled at birds of passage flying in a wedge against the wind. "You see, Uncle, there must be someone at the head."

"Yes, my dear, but those at the head have the hardest work. It isn't at all like that with us."

The injured man, seated by the ash-strewn hearth, his hand swathed in bloody rags, seemed to take his misfortune philosophically.

"I can still work," he said. And then he added, naively, "I'll be exempt from service."

As Claudia had foreseen, he lacked nothing. Perhaps his old mother expressed her gratitude for the visit too humbly? But how be strict in the measure of things when you depend on someone else for the right to be alive, for the right to suffer?

The expression of joy at the prospect of escaping military service shocked Claudia, who spoke of it as they were returning.

"I don't like his want of heroism, either," said Henri. "But tell me, what could we know of the real feelings of these people if education had given

them the veneer of hypocrisy? They show themselves naked, while others, whose words do not wound you, are often worse. And besides, this poor fellow, who sees military service only as a crushing burden in peace time, might rush into the front rank and be killed in defence of his home. The best thing we can do is to give each one something to defend. We have judged others too hastily—it is a harder thing to understand them.”

They had regained the high road, and were marching along with the physical satisfaction of movement, when a cart which came up to them stopped suddenly. Count Armand de Hauteroche, who leaped from it, was a gentleman of good family, a rustic in every sense of the word. Totally lacking in culture, a great hunter and horseman, the young squire was wasting at inns what remained of his fortune, scuffling with the farmwife while the farmer was out, cracking broad jokes with peasants at the fairs. Puy-maufray was disagreeably surprised at his familiarity with Claudia. He did not know that Hauteroche was looked upon with so much favour at Radegonde. His displeasure grew when the newcomer, without formality, announced that he would keep them company to the château. Lunch was inevitable. The girl seemed not displeased, and the walk terminated with stupid remarks about the weather and the pleasures of the countryside.

Dominic's reception was calm. He had not for-

given Henri for speaking ill of the Comtesse de Fourchamps whose grace cast a charm over his innocence. At once Hauteroche noisily attracted the master's attention. He told stories, was remarkably skilful in keeping the centre of the stage.

Harlé took his revenge over the coffee, in the conservatory.

"My dear count," he said, "your hunting adventures are the finest in the world. But look! you only chase after beasts. Did you ever realize that I am a hunter, too? Without capering about in the ice and the mud I send out my pack of workers to conquer the world. It's good sport. And then I don't commit useless massacre. I exact a tribute just as your ancestors did."

The count did not contradict, although he resented the comparison between his ancestors and this paper-maker. But you had to be indulgent to a millionaire, especially if he had a pretty daughter to marry off. While Mme. Marie-Thérèse explained the miracles of Our Lady of the Shop to Henri, Hauteroche went into raptures over the wonderful grotto in which a steam pump shot a torrent of water over some fish in the noisy basin below. That seemed to him the highest expression of art, and he shouted his appreciation.

"How I'd like to be a captain of industry," he cried, suddenly, with excessive enthusiasm.

"I can very well believe it," said Harlé, modestly

triumphant. "The Pope can make me a count more easily than you a manufacturer of paper."

This time the scion of nobility felt that the bourgeois had gone beyond the limit. He had to keep an appointment to see some horses. After he had gone Dominic took Henri's arm.

"Well, old chap, you aren't saying a thing. I'll bet you're thinking of a beautiful Comtesse de Hauteroche whose first name is Claudia."

"You're crazy!"

"Well, I've thought of it. The Hauteroche château is a beauty. I could make it fit for a prince."

"Not forgetting the cellars, eh?"

"Yes; I know; the count does get a bit rough. But my money would soon give him back his family pride. And my own power, plus ancestors——"

"And what about me, Papa?" cried Claudia.

"What would I be doing?"

"You would do—everything. All I think of is your happiness. You have everything except a great name. Do you dare to say that you haven't winked your eye at Hauteroche?"

"I do. It's a lovely name. I should have *winked*, as you say, if I'd listened to Mme. Marie-Thérèse celebrating the glories of the house. But really, that's going a little too fast. I'm twenty. I don't think I'll lack chances. It seems to me I'll have my pick."

"That's fine, my child. But I'm suspicious of

Paris. Its vices are worse—and more costly—than those of the country. Hauteroche is stupid because of the taint in the line. Did you notice the lesson I read him a little while ago? You have to be a republican nowadays. Even the Pope's one. He has his reasons, I think."

"Don't you think," asked Puymaufroy, "that you are all talking about marriage as if it were an industrial combine?"

"It won't be you who'll change the world," said Harlé, drily. "If life gets mixed up with the question of income, it's not our fault. We can't do anything. My duty to my daughter is to combine all the conditions of happiness. I put an ever-flourishing financial condition first. She will have to look out for the rest."

"And I think I can go as far from that beginning as any one. But I warn you, Papa, I shall have a word to say."

"That's understood. You won't refuse to accept advice from the Comtesse de Fourchamps." And (as Henri could not restrain a gesture): "Listen, Henri, don't make a fool of yourself. It is incredible that a Parisian, of family, should become so provincial. You know better than most people what the gossip of Paris amounts to. You've got something against the comtesse, that's all. Well, you're wrong. The comtesse is beautiful, loved, honoured by everyone. What's more, we're expecting her

here. You aren't going to sulk, I hope. She won't let you."

"And when is Mme. la comtesse coming?"

"In three days. Somebody wants me. Good-night."

"Claudy, you were coming to lunch with me to-day," said Henri. "Let me expect you to-morrow."

"Yes, Uncle Henri; I'd love to come."

Night had fallen. Henri de Puymafray returned to his lonely hearth, wondering whether he could, with the help of the dead, stand against the powers he saw so clearly, so strongly arrayed against him.

### CHAPTER III

**T**HE next morning, when the pony trotted into the yard at Puymaufray, Henri, who was watching for it from the window, came down the steps like a gladiator going into the arena. Nanette, who was also on the lookout from her dormer window, catching sight of Mme. Marie-Thérèse's sharp face, wrapped in shawls and blue with the wind, shut her lips and, with a hard look, shot at her some unchristian wishes like an arrow whistling her welcome.

However, Claudia and the marquis, arm in arm like two lovers, had already crossed the threshold, with bursts of laughter and joyous gestures, and when Nanette came down into the oak-timbered room which Puymaufray used for a study, two young kisses smacked her cheeks.

"How are you, Nanette? What have you been thinking of me—back three days without coming over for the news? It just couldn't be arranged—and not my fault at that. Would you believe it, uncle never said a word yesterday, and I didn't make any excuses either, so as not to tell fibs."

"Well, then, Missy, don't begin now. Friendship

is rare in this world. And when you have a godfather like yours, you can't love him too much. You'll realize it later on."

"Here," cried Puymaufroy, "if you're going to start lecturing you'd better get back to your work. Besides, Mme. Marie-Thérèse is frozen. Go settle her comfortably before the fire and see to lunch. We're going for a walk in the park; we'll be back in less than an hour."

It was half park, half garden. There were flower beds with high hedges radiating from a fountain under an Ionic cupola; there were rose bushes and vegetables and fruit trees and lawns, dark in the shadow of great oaks, and the ruddy trunks of pine trees bent against the storm, all in magnificent disorder. Claudia loved this confusion. She instinctively realized that the imitation English park at Radegonde, with its cement rocks and the Harlé monogram over the gate, was not the last word in art. But the vegetables were too much for the pupil of Mme. Marie-Thérèse.

"Uncle," she protested, "your park is very beautiful, all over ice and with this light on it. But don't you think these cabbages might be planted somewhere else?"

"Yes, my dear, they might. I could spend a lot of money here disentangling the jumble; I wish I had never spent my money for worse than that. And yet I find it charming. And so, instead of

changing it, I give it away to those who are sighing for a bit of land. Every spring I assign them lots, and I am well repaid by the rosy cheeks of the children. It's just transferring pleasure."

"That's true, Uncle. You're very good."

"No. I am just a man. At least I won *that* from my ruin. You see, wealth isolates the heart. We get rich and we're surrounded by the selfishness of those who have been beaten, and the worse selfishness of those who have won out. I suppose if I were a great manufacturer I would be like Harlé. I would stake my glory on making bigger profits by cutting down wages. But as I happen to be a fallen feudal chieftain . . . well, all I can do is to laugh at Nanette when she gets angry ' ecause those that I've helped take advantage of and pilfer my fruit or sneak off with my firewoo

"But surely you don't excuse that sort of thing?"

"Why, yes, I do. I get the feeling of being generous for the little I do for them. But they think it's so trivial compared with what I might do. The difference in our points of view causes some misunderstanding."

"Well, but we can't give everything away to other people."

"Never fear. We'll be spared that calamity. But I do want to make you understand one thing. I want you to know that the world that you see is deformed by wealth. And then I want you to realize

that there is another world, which is deformed by poverty. You have a duty to that second world. A change in your fortune would show you how close you are to it. Instead of running away from it, go toward it with open hands, and you will be happier in giving yourself to the lowest than you can ever be in parading around with your class."

"But we *do* do good. Papa does."

"Yes; by debit and credit; part of the invisible expenses of running his plant. He assures his position in the curé's paradise and then gouges for twice as much those to whom he had done good. He doesn't know the value of a kind word which goes right to the heart. It isn't his fault. He never had a chance to suffer. He would have to be ruined."

"And me?—do you want *me* to have that chance?"

"Perhaps. Why do you need more land than I will leave you? Poor dear, your millions will bring you more misery than you think. They'll make you a pretty little artificial thing with your soul forever false, unless you can protect yourself against the corruption that goes on every hour of the day. I was a millionaire, too. I did a great deal of harm to others and to myself without ever realizing what I was missing. A chance I didn't deserve saved me from the abyss— And besides, I am a man. Society doesn't give women the chance to win back."

Claudia heard him without understanding. She felt that she was being held back, by the power of a

true love, from all the things which promised her happiness. What was the object of this fierce passion which wanted her to be ruined? A thousand questions rushed to her lips, but she did not dare to express them. Puymaufray was vexed by this silent resistance and realized his mistake. He was speaking out his thoughts without trying to enter into the thoughts of her whom he wished to persuade. In vain he looked for a way. And both, loving each other, pursued their separate paths, hardly conscious of the fact that their pleasant talk was ending in silence, troubled with unspoken misunderstandings.

The bell rang out for lunch and called them back to each other. Claudia flung her arms around Puymaufray's neck, and cried;

"Uncle, dear, I love you, and I know you love me. I know you're hurt by the way I feel about things, but that's the way the world seems, to me. I must be wrong. But Papa tells me exactly the opposite, and every day he proves what he says, with examples in real life. Please forgive my stupid brain and kiss me. I know you want me to be happy."

"What else could I want, dear child?"

They signed their truce with kisses, and went toward Nanette and Mme. Marie-Thérèse, who seemed to be having a most friendly conversation near the fountain.

Nanette hadn't wasted her time. Without beating about the bush she had worked her way into the

favour of this astute woman whose intellectual superiority she took pains to announce. She had won her confidence and was rewarded by having the governess tell her at great length of the noble house of Hauteroche. At last she cried out:

"Our Miss Claudia will make a lovely comtesse."

"I should say so," replied Mme. Marie-Thérèse, "only I never even thought of that."

Lunch was very gay. Claudia's final words had set the sun shining in Henri's heart, and the girl was happy to see the happiness she had brought. When they were alone beside the little table where the coffee was served Claudia said suddenly:

"Well, Uncle, tell me what you want me to do."

"But all I want is for you to be yourself, my dear. I want you to be honest and good, instead of yielding to the temptations all around you. I don't doubt that your father loves you. But he loves you for himself and I love you for *yourself*. He thinks he's doing the right thing by making you a part of his ambitions for money and place. He wants to make you the instrument for his happiness and for yours. But what would you do with all that magnificence? I know. You would exhaust its brief pleasures and then you would be bored. And, when you were blasée and your heart was empty, you would still have the authority of your beauty and the power of your wealth to expend in Heaven knows what follies. You know by this time what a girl can do in

Paris. You were dragged off to Italy when you were too young to understand. They took the flower of your freshness and flung it into the wind. They stole away the pleasure of wanting things. Think of something you might want. There's nothing left. And now they're talking of marrying you. What do you expect from marriage? Your vanity will be satisfied. And then?

"Oh, so it's Hauteroche that's on your mind. Well, must I be destined to unhappiness just because I'll be a comtesse? You're a marquis yourself, Uncle. That's why you can make fun of the nobility."

"I'm not making fun of it. I'm judging it. It's a feather in the cap, the conventional thing for millionaires nowadays. My grandfather Pannetier, who paid for my father's name with his fortune, got rich by selling paper shoes to the defenders of the empire. The founder of my family, not so many centuries ago, was a dirty shepherd, you can tell that by our name, Lepastre. I'd like to show you an ancestor of the Montmorencys say in Cæsar's time. From what incredible mixtures we spring! Even Hauteroche——"

"But, Uncle, you saw very well that I don't want to marry Hauteroche."

"I never thought that you'd let them marry you to that drunkard. And yet you didn't discourage him any too much. You even took the trouble to conceal his hopes from me. And yet I don't know

but what you will do worse if Mme. la Comtesse de Fourchamps is to be your guide. That woman wouldn't be at Radegonde if your mother were alive."

"Mme. la Comtesse will not impose on me, Uncle. I will make my own choice, and I promise you I won't choose without getting your advice."

"Oh, Claudia, Claudia dear, how well you guessed what I wanted you to say. You don't know, dearest, how much I love you. I want you to be a real woman—loving, loved, good—because love comes to goodness in the end. Nothing else can make you content with yourself—can put you above the ups and downs of life. No one ever talks to you about your mother; I myself hesitate and tremble to talk about her. But a time has come for decision. You have to choose between vulgar pleasures which are only appearance, and the true happiness, the human happiness which comes from a life nobly spent. I have told you that I lived vilely until the day when your wonderful mother opened my eyes and made me a better man. The run of mankind was as far from me at that time as they seem to you to-day. I was in another world, as people stupidly say. And all of a sudden I saw that it was wrong, that we must love one another and help one another. To-morrow sorrow may come to you and you will look for the solace of a kind word. If I have saved anything from the wreck of a misspent life, I owe it to your mother. I owe her everything. And since a terrible

fate has taken her away I am trying to pay my debt to you—if you want. Now do you understand?"

"Oh, Uncle, why have you never spoken this way to me before?"

"I have, my dear. But I spoke badly. To-day danger has made me brave. There is more. When your mother died I would have died with her, and in her last agony she saw in my eyes that I would die. She cried out that I must live—for you. It was her last word: and I have lived. And here I am, trying to find and set apart whatever she put into you of her spirit, because you are of her soul and her blood and her heart, and you must not be false to her. But the world is strong and can drag the upright spirit from its proper path. Even those who love you are carried away and try to carry you with them. And I am fighting to hold you. Day by day I have fought—for twenty years. I have been without skill, without persistence, unworthy of the obligation your mother put upon me, often near defeat, alone against everyone, always resisting desperately this combination of the strongest. But when I was deserted by all humanity, some power cried out your mother's name in the depths of my soul, and it was enough to win, for she loves you still through me. The goodness of your heart returns, goes back to her—to us. I am crying because I have suffered. But you are crying, too, and that makes suffering a joy. Your mother is coming back. Do not speak: I see her."

Sobbing in each other's arms they clung together as if never to be separated again.

"Uncle, dear," said Claudia, finally, "God bless you for giving me this hour. I am only a child. Oh, how you must love me to be able to speak that way to me! And I—I misunderstood you. I am frivolous and foolish and ungrateful. Your heart was open to me and I closed mine. Say that you forgive me."

"I cannot say the word. I love you."

"Yes, yes. Say: 'I forgive you; I want you to obey me.'"

"I forgive you. I want you to obey me."

"Now, I will obey you, daddy."

Henri had a moment of terrible happiness at the name; he started. Claudia went on:

"You see, I'm not really bad, and I always come to you first. Only you're so sad and the world is so young and so beautiful."

"Do you think so?"

"It seems so to me. And you can't wonder that I just let myself go. You wouldn't want to lock me up at Radegonde? Papa makes things too easy for me, I know. You reproach him because of the future. Maybe you're right. But how can I help being grateful to him for the present. Everything smiles at me and makes me happy. You think it would be better to have a little unhappiness? Don't let's tempt fate. Let me try to be good without having

suffered. I know it's harder, but if you help me can't I succeed? Papa loves me in his way and wants me to triumph with his money so I can give him some new strength for himself. We won't change him. Why can't I take advantage of the beautiful spectacle which he is preparing for my eyes? Don't I know that people will covet my money much more than they'll love me? It's a comedy, but it's very amusing, and I want to have a good time first. There's nothing wrong with pleasure in itself. The danger is that people forget to live. I won't run that risk, because I've got you. You'll always be there, fierce as conscience. I'll tell you everything. We'll laugh and we'll cry together. And best of all, we'll love each other. You will tell me about my mother and I will try to give you back something of her."

If Dominic could have taken his mind off his factory that night he might have noticed the brilliant eyes, the short, nervous speech, the gay accents, so rare in his friend. He paid no attention. On his side, Henri felt sure of Claudia and had some compunctions about abusing his victory over Harlé. He pitied him a little. But when he returned to Nanette he thought only of his triumph and cried to her:

"The child is ours. I won for Claire, by Claire. I have given her back her child. I have saved what remains of our beloved dead."

## CHAPTER IV

**M**ADAME LA COMTESSE DE FOUR-  
CHAMPS was received at Radegonde like  
a queen. She carried it off very well.  
She was well born and for twenty years she had  
reigned by her beauty, her grace, gently sharpened  
by an indulgent contempt for everything that was  
outside her orbit. Paris has an unheard-of treasure  
of fidelity for its queens of the stage or of society;  
when a woman is proclaimed beautiful, even if she be  
merely attractive, she will keep her reputation for  
beauty until it is finally in ruins. The Comtesse  
de Fourchamps had not got to that point yet, but  
she was calling in the aid of paints and cosmetics,  
which emphasized her features and showed up her  
implacable will under the gaiety of her smile. After  
having been brunette and blonde, in turn, she was  
now red-haired and counselled old and young, as  
Claudia could testify, in the matter of colours. Her  
eyes were still beautiful, radiant with promise to  
which the imperious tightening of her lips gave the  
lie. She was tall, her features were coldly correct,  
and there was something imposing, authoritative  
in the way she held back her head. The woman

had "pull." One could almost say she was all "pull."

Her husband, a prominent Alpine climber, met her at the Grands Mulets and was her slave before they returned to Chamonix. With an income of twenty thousand francs he remained a poor man and sold his farms in Normandy to put everything in his wife's hands. They set themselves up luxuriously in Paris, and employed capital of all kinds so fruitfully that their luxury increased too fast for scandal. Marie de Fourchamps showed her superiority in assuring her support. Rich Jews, ever in search of social authority, were the first. With them came the crowd of hungry journalists, avengers of every offense. The Fourchamps, in fact, seemed to be of a doubtful nobility. But the lofty favour of an archduke, based on loans to friends hard pressed by dressmakers, had made the lovely comtesse a familiar of princes. Behind these solid ramparts she could defy the world; and she did defy it, obliging to everybody and generous to those who helped her, crushing only those who were already down, disarming slander with her grace; and succeeded.

Fourchamps, however, went back to his life of mountain climbing and followed the path of Humboldt on the slopes of Chimborazo. He remained, unhappy man, inside a volcano. He is still there, in spite of the searching parties sent out by his wife.

Her mourning was of a rare propriety. At a time of life when every year counted she lived in seclusion for a whole year, in the company of Baron Oppert, her financial adviser. By a refinement of delicacy which was highly appreciated by everyone the Baron himself did not give his annual flower fête that year.

The Ball in White, to which Harlé took Claudia, was the Comtesse de Fourchamps's brilliant return to the world. The noble widow did not even ask herself whether the ball was audacious, for she had all the trumps. Certain names had become irrevocably attached to hers, and the aristocratic crowd was destined to come to her. And Baron Oppert, as a convert, brought with him the support of the Church; which, with money, was enough.

Harlé did not, therefore, lack authority to shield him from Henri's criticism. Not that he needed the support of Baron Oppert, for he had that happy disposition which made him think himself the equal of any money king. Without knowing the baron's past he admired his force and respected him as a splendid example of humanity. But his soul was exclusively for the comtesse. He was a victim to her charms and not less a victim because the lovely hand he kissed was opening the door of the world to him. It was a door which was marked "Closed" but which might open, at least halfway and without too much difficulty, to a Chicago meat packer.

A great project over which Harlé had brooded a

long time was about to be realized. But what was industrial sovereignty to him without the crowning glory of social success? This was the supreme reward, and the comtesse, who possessed it, seemed to walk under an aureole of grace and beauty. A union with her could put at his disposal the hypothetical ancestors of the Fourchamps line. He was exempt from the strict propriety of a convert and could show the utmost zeal in furthering the political designs of the Church. He often said that the aristocracy of wealth ought not to refuse its support to the ungilded nobility. One possessed the present hour; the other was the ornament of centuries of history. They should walk together, in broad daylight, united under the Holy Father. What did the name matter if a mere change in words could assure the reality of their power? First they had to push back the Revolution. At last Oppert understood. Harlé was the man to hold back the mob. His workers never made a false step. He made it his business to combinate certain interests, to bring up practical propositions and shame the theorists. Through him the upper classes could win back their hold. Society would be balanced again and then they would realize how much will power there was in the man who had succeeded where others who seemed greater had failed.

These dreams, Harlé imagined, were his secrets, but the comtesse had divined them long ago. In

moments of weariness and boredom she would tell herself that this might be her destiny. Soon little of the joys of the world would remain for her. She had never enjoyed anything but the triumph of her charm. Her beauty was coming to an end. There remained the inexhaustible enjoyment of power.

It was child's play for her to keep the paper-maker on the alert, always wavering between hope and fear. She took it into her head to chaperon Claudia, and Harlé deeply appreciated the favour. With the child she seemed to be taking the future statesman. But from the first moment she felt, in Claudia and even in Harlé himself, the distant opposition of Puymaufray. She felt that he was the lion in the path who must be conquered first. Without understanding the authority against which her own power was breaking she decided to put everything to the touch and risk an encounter at once.

The most minute scrutiny of Puymaufray's past revealed nothing, except the legend of his wild life in Paris, which could give her a clue. Her investigation in Paris was in fact the one thing to throw her off the scent, for neither despair of love nor financial ruin could account for Henri's exile. The man of the world never pays for a catastrophe of passion by renouncing the world. The loss of his fortune was no better, for the traffic between coats of arms and fresh millions was at its height. There was something else. But what?

The countess came to find out. Her first move after she arrived at Radegonde was to announce that she wanted "to surprise the Puymaufray in his lair."

When they came to the house Nanette informed them that Henri was out in the fields, discussing the sale of some trees with M. Deschars and Pierre Quété, the wheelwright. They decided to go to meet them. The tang of the air and the hard ground made walking a pleasure.

"Who is M. Deschars?" asked the countess, as she might have asked: "Is that a crow or a pigeon over there?"

"Deschars!" Harlé exclaimed. "Another queer one. I didn't know he was here. He's a friend of Claudia's. They used to play together during the holidays. The Deschars are an old family in Poitou who've got rich by a century or two of stinginess. This one isn't quite thirty and is sowing francs along every road because he likes a wandering life. He's not a bad fellow. He travels all over the world and is always coming back from China or Java or somewhere. Sometimes you see him in Paris or in his park, about an hour's walk from here. I don't know where he's been the last two years. Henri must be glad to see him back. Those two like to hear each other talk about how bad everything is. Maybe Deschars's paradoxes will amuse you. He sweetly proposes to turn the world upside down

because somewhere on his travels he saw the opposite of what we have or do or are. That rather seems to me to be an argument for changing the others."

"I have nothing to propose. I let other people alone. You'll never make me believe that the world's a bad place, no matter what you say. It's enough for me and my friends to make the best of whatever comes up."

"Perhaps," said Claudia, "perhaps we can save——"

"You're going to give us one of your uncle's sermons," shouted Dominic. "But here he comes himself."

Puymaufroy's astonishment was extreme.

"My dear marquis," cried the countess, without giving him a moment. "I bring you peace in the folds of my cloak. You quarrelled with me once about I don't know what; and Harlé, here, pretends that you still remember it. So I've come to receive your apologies and to be merciful. I see repentance in your eyes. Good. You are forgiven."

"Madame, I am overwhelmed by your excessive indulgence, and I shall do all I can to be worthy of it. And in bidding you welcome to Puymaufroy I have the pleasure of presenting to you my friend Maurice Deschars, who brings us the latest news from the end of the world."

"Ah, I sha'n't ask for it," said the countess, laughing with contemptuous kindness. "Just at present

I know no Negroes. I have a few little Chinese at the Mission society. That is enough. You must let me be ignorant and take the marquis's word for it that you're to be admired."

"I'm not to be admired at all, madame, for I've done nothing admirable; never."

"What? And didn't you go for a whole month without water in the desert, in a white helmet, surrounded by blacks who betrayed you to the natives who wanted to assassinate you? Didn't you follow in the footsteps of Stanley?"

"No, madame. I explored nowhere and discovered nothing. I was simply travelling about. There's nothing to boast of in that."

"Well, I'm sorry for you," replied the lady, whom this simplicity instinctively displeased. "I met Stanley when he was the thing. When I found out that one of his companions had bought a little Negress for a checkered handkerchief and made the troup eat her, just to show, then I got a thrill."

"You'll have to excuse my friend," observed Puy-maufray. "Every man does what he can."

The intruder broke up the first burst of confidence which the comtesse's strategy had arranged. He was a tall, dark young man of a rather timid appearance, with sombre gray eyes in which a natural resolution seemed to be at grips with a distant melancholy. Harlé welcomed him with boisterous cordiality and Claudia seemed sincere enough when she

told him she was glad to see him. The comtesse, searching their faces, could see nothing more than good friendship. All the same a premonition entered her heart.

But she had come to see Puymaufray. She cheerfully reproached him for misunderstanding her friendship and told him her troubles, then banished them with a smile. No one knew better than she did the precise cost of worldly frivolity and the mistake of judging by appearances. Life flings apart those whom common feelings ought to bring together. When they meet again they find that they are giving themselves to ingrates. All this she said in a low voice, as if she were talking to herself, while the others followed a few paces behind.

Like a good Parisian who is on guard against woman when she is most charming, Henri seemed to yield utterly to the attraction of her triumphant smile. The clever woman of the world, for her part, did not run the risk of misunderstanding this easy surrender. Beneath her confident words there lurked a reserve. These were only preliminaries.

But Harlé, looking at his friend, joyfully thought: "He's caught hand and foot." Claudia was more skeptical and waited. For the moment she was quarrelling with Deschars. He had answered her first friendly questions and had joined her in reminiscence, but he was obstinate in his assertion that he had brought nothing home for his friends.

"I didn't find anything worthy of you," he said. "So I brought nothing but myself. And that's nothing."

"It would be enough. But I know you too well, and I'm sure you brought something with you. Let's see. Surely you've got some little black men with silver rings in their noses, a stuffed tiger, some sabres, or some idols or something?"

"I have nothing. There must be a chest of clothes and things somewhere, but it took the wrong boat. Some day, when we're not thinking about it, it will turn up. That's for Nanette."

"I knew that I'd make you speak in the end. Well, I'll have to make up to Nanette. She won't refuse me a bit of foulard."

There was a wood fire in the "tapestry room," where Nanette was serving the tea. When she had taken off her furs the Comtesse de Fourchamps shone with the joy of being at home and declared that she was glad to escape from the world.

"Well, at last I've found a real farmer," she said. "I admit that I was surprised at first by all the pecking poultry in your yard. But my dear marquis, what you call your hut and what I've seen of your park are enchanting. They're real, not just scenery for an opera. It's a lovely retreat for a Zouave who's become a hermit."

"I didn't choose it, madame. I found it so and I'll leave it so. Claudia will keep it, out of respect

for my memory, safe for a little while from the axe and the trowel."

"What I admire above all is that you've never regretted anything of what you left behind. What a powerful seduction it must have been to make you leave Paris so suddenly. It's very wonderful. At least so long as it wasn't some mean trick which Paris played on you and which you have never forgiven."

"Something of that, I think. All I knew in Rome and Paris was carnival. Well, you soon see the end of that. Everything they went mad over seemed to me to be a disguise of something real. Here I understand everything, I am satisfied with and I love them. And if I dared I'd say that they love me, too. I get a joy from the earth which you would never understand."

"Rousseau! Mirabeau! The friend of mankind! It's marvellous! I'm afraid that I'd be a rather unconvincing peasant. But just the same I think you're to be envied. But it's no use; you can't cut yourself off from contact with humanity."

"There are human beings here, I assure you."

"Who's that? Your old bearded Nanette?"

"Don't laugh at her. She is a noble soul. I don't know a better. Then there's Pierre Quété, the blacksmith, whom you saw making off in the bushes when you came up. Winter nights I go down and smoke my pipe at the smithy. Besides, I have a

quarrel of thirty years' standing with Dominic and a love affair of twenty years' with Claudia. What more do I want? From time to time Deschars comes back from the antipodes. Finally, from Paris, farther from us than the antipodes, you come yourself, madame. You couldn't say we lacked anything. Rather that we are overwhelmed."

"What? You refuse to let me sing you a madrigal?"

"No, I'm quite sincere. And I haven't said anything about my books, which you never find time to read in Paris, although you have to talk about them. And I ought to count in the permanent sights of the land, the man in the furrow, the animals, the harvest, the whole life of the earth!"

"Stop. It's too beautiful. A pipe with Pierre would be enough. I should have admitted that I was beaten at the start. And yet, you can call me a fool, but I insist that pretty soon you'll be giving up these pleasures for the melancholy of Paris. From this day you'll owe me a visit. You aren't the man to keep me waiting."

"I shall have the pleasure of being at your service, madame, whenever you command me."

"I knew it. Harlé has an appointment in Paris for some great business matters, he says. Claudia is coming up for the concerts and theatres and some dancing. If you don't come up I sha'n't be able to keep her there. I'll have the regular talk which

always comes before she goes: about uncle, bored to death, all alone, among the pleasures you have just described. You take away the friends I want to keep beside me. So come along, and be one of my friends yourself."

"Won't you let me think that I am one of them already?"

"I'd rather believe that you sincerely want to be."

While they were talking Harlé was pressing Deschars to tell him about the manufactures of Ceylon. How did they make paper there? Was it possible that a traveller could come back without knowing that? Might as well remain in Poitou. The comtesse kept a watchful eye on Claudia, who broke into her father's discussion with impertinent questions about Buddha's tooth and Adam's footprint, of which she desired a casting.

Decidedly the comtesse did not like Deschars. A handsome youth, no doubt, and nicely set up, with his look of a young animal at rest. Why did she get the feeling that he was tired of himself, without interest in life? He was full of contradictions, and the Parisian felt that he was hardening himself against the conventional lies of our civilization. His simplicity, his savage honesty, broke down falsehood, and Claudia could not help laughing with him, when she should have been sending him back to the jungle, about his business.

Claudia felt that her godfather's courteous gaiety was concealing a fever in his heart. She went to him, spoke lovingly to him, and made him laugh by her wild remarks. The comtesse quickly recognized the deep bond between the two. Evidently she was to find a stronger resistance than she had expected.

After all, there was nothing surprising in this love of an aging man for the child who graced his loneliness, his only joy in twenty years of solitary rural life. Time and prudence would be required to break up this alliance. Claudia was sufficiently attracted by the pleasures of youth. Could Puymaufroy come back to the world? The adventure was hazardous. The country had swallowed up all his life. Yet there might be a reawakening! The ancient flame might be born again; Puymaufroy, the beau of Paris, might burst into a supreme flare of light before he went out forever. Dominic Harlé and his daughter would be freed from the menace which now threatened the comtesse. And then, who could tell what turn things might take? The marquis, coming splendidly into the world, had a value in the marriage market quite superior to that of the vulgar paper-maker with his superfluous millions. The chance was worth gambling for.

But the gambler felt herself nervous. She knew that Puymaufroy could not be caught so easily as

Harlé. Henri was armed with a universal disgust; his secret, if he had one, was not to be discovered.

"I haven't been beaten yet," she reassured herself.

Henri, too, was disquieted; but he let himself go, in the joy of being close to Claudia, and forgot the future.

They parted with an engagement to dine, and at dinner the comtesse made it her affair to eliminate Deschars. She decided that he was not dangerous.

"So it's really true, Monsieur Deschars," she said at the end of her investigation. "You really go up and down in the world for nothing."

"For myself, madame. I can't find a place for myself in active life, like M. Harlé, so I take my fun in watching other people live, and I like the trouble of changing my point of view from time to time."

"Well, there are plenty of things to see in Paris."

"Yes, but in Paris I'd be something to be seen myself. Our old Europe, which makes such a fuss in the world, isn't so very large, I assure you. In Asia there are races who hold all earthly happiness in contempt. We took the doctrine from them and preach it at every crossroads. But who ever practises it? Well, I am not of my world. The thing that amuses me most is the variety of ways in which people imagine they can deceive life. I forget to live myself by watching them—and that is what I gain. Why should I go back to Paris?"

**"I don't know. You are a greater traveller than I thought, because you are coming from the stars. Go back there, dear sir. Look down with pity on those who still cling to the earth, let your joy be in watching. We will take ours in living."**

## CHAPTER V

**F**OR a whole month the Comtesse de Fourchamps kept Ste. Radegonde on the alert. A fine steel spring in her restored every fault of will and action after the utmost weariness. She had to be well, had to feel her strength. Then she could compel herself to do anything.

From the day Maria Billaud understood her destiny she began to save her energies for the great steeplechase of life. She kept a book of her physical wealth. She took care of herself, prevented deterioration or repaired it. She vanquished joy and sorrow alike, so that her body might not be torn by great emotions. She would have no wrinkles. No tears—no great shouts of laughter. A smile was enough. Her whole life was concentrated in the pleasure of reigning, with no other profit than the thought: "I am on the heights." And more: "Others are below me."

She planned the assault of Puymaufray with grand deliberation. She rode and drove; she played with her fan in the drawing room or became poetic in the conservatory. She demanded visits from Deschars: she took pains to be friends with Nanette.

It was from Nanette that she won Henri's great secret.

"He loves Mam'selle Claudia too much, madame. It isn't strange; she's his godchild. He saw her born. He'll be very sorry when she's married and leaves him all alone. Ah, if madame would only give him something to think about; take him to Paris—he ought to be kept there a long time. Madame would be very good if she would help me save m'sieur le marquis from the lonely old age which is awaiting him."

The noble lady had a high opinion of this ally. But had she really learned the secret? Was there a secret to learn? Why this burst of audacious confidence right under Puymaufroy's eyes? The countess redoubled her efforts at friendship. And Nanette, expanding, talking endlessly, told her nothing.

At night when Henri returned from Radegonde and sat down before the fireplace, Nanette congratulated him with ironic commentaries:

"Ah, you're a lucky one, Monsieur Henri, to make yourself loved like that. Because she loves you, that woman from Paris does. She can't talk about another thing. You can see that her heart's full of it. You know love affairs like that, sometimes there's an idea behind them."

"And what idea do you suggest is behind Mme. la comtesse?"

"Oh, I don't know," answered Nanette; "perhaps

she has a husband picked for Mlle. Claudia—a man you wouldn't like. But she surely hasn't come down to Ste. Radegonde to see me. M. Harlé seems to be quite overcome with his comtesse, but her eye is all for you. Maybe she wants to be a marquise. However, my idea is that there is something underhand going on."

"Tell me what you think."

"I can't tell you because I don't know. She's too good friends with our little one. She must be thinking of using her somehow. M. Harlé wouldn't get her anywhere. So what?"

"Well, there's only one thing sure. We've got to protect Claudia."

Claudia was protecting herself quite well, and without great effort. True, she had had no great temptations. She had had a surfeit of pleasures too soon and had little curiosity left. She had been shown a world where money was everything, could do everything, accomplished everything. She had money, and youth, and beauty. So she was destined to rule. But over whom?—over what? She did not ask. The future seemed so beautiful that she made it a point of pride not to stretch out her hand to capture it. She liked to think that the world was coming to her, and she rejoiced in the pleasure of waiting.

How should she have any presentiment of sorrow? Undoubtedly other people suffered, and she was

sincerely upset by that. But what were the misfortunes which seem to come to others, in another world, without possible effect on her? At most an opportunity to show her superior generosity, to prove to herself, delightfully, that she was piteous and charitable toward the miserable, whom God, had intentionally put under her feet.

Money cost her nothing and she gave money. She also gave compassionate words which rose to her lips since her heart was uncorrupted with pharisaism. Privations endured for the sake of others—the joys of sacrifice—had no meaning for her. They were texts for sermons, no doubt, but how could they apply to her who had no need of denying herself anything in order to win the blessing of the Church and to yield to the will of the Lord of the World. The rich are told to give; the poor, to be resigned. The former give meanly; the latter are not resigned. The rich often give to prevent the want of resignation in the poor from being fatal: their giving is not the act of sacrifice demanded by the Man of Galilee. Greed that has been satisfied is on the defensive against the greed that demands to be satisfied, and the war of the classes is let loose.

Claudia could not see so far ahead. She thought sincerely that she was good because she gave and because she felt herself wounded by the more striking appearances of evil. Henri's efforts to lift her charity to the plane of real compassion seemed to her to be

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vain subtleties, compared with the facilities for charitableness which her father's wealth gave her.

By nature she resisted the suggestions of class, but she was not strong enough to rebel, by herself, against the hierarchy of the strongest, who gave out the lovely things in the world. She was tempted. Her education had predisposed her to accept. She felt herself weak, and it was only when Puymaufroy had invoked her mother's name that a great hope came to her. She had rushed to his arms as to asylum. Without thinking, without hesitation or regret, she put herself in his hands for protection against her own weakness.

She did not love her "father" less, she thought; she was certainly grateful for the prodigious efforts he made for her pleasure. But she was put on her guard against him by her "godfather," and the very words which used to reassure her now seemed unconscious blasphemy.

The comtesse was more expert, could always manage her tongue, and so kept her hold on Claudia's affections. How could Claudia help loving her at night, when Puymaufroy had gone, and the comtesse launched into delicate praise of him, ending with the express advice to obey him in everything. This friendly advice was received with such a burst of confidence that the comtesse lost all hope for a moment. She had discovered the full force of love which was opposed to her plans. But she had on her side

youth, beauty, and wealth; enough to plunge the sword of death into the union of these two hearts.

Puymaufroy was very happy, and off his guard. The coming trip to Paris worried him because the comtesse was to be there.

"But, Uncle dear," said Claudia, "if Mme. la Comtesse is as wicked as you say, how is it that the people who know her make her so welcome?"

"She is wicked only as the world is wicked. Why *should* the world reject her, Claudine?"

"Oh, but the world can't be altogether corrupt. There are good people. Look how all the best people came to the Bal Blanc that made you so angry. What did they come for? I don't suppose it was for the glory of the Fourchamps name, was it? Nor money, because the girls that went there all have millions of dowry."

"Money needs money. Money attracts money. Just ask your papa if he'd let you marry a poor man unless he had some great name."

"So it is money."

"It's everything. What you call 'the world' is simply a union of the strongest. Your papa puts that very well. And when you're done with brute force, money is the power which includes everything. The old nobility pretended that they put a crown of chivalry on wealth and strength. If you don't look at it too closely it seems a beautiful dream. What's left of it to-day? Richelieu dynamited the châteaux

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of the nobility; Louis XIV ruined his court; Louis XV corrupted his. The Revolutionists guillotined the nobility, and, what was worse, put it into their heads to call in aliens against France. From that time the nobility is nothing but a memory. It's a memory which some people exploit out of vainglory. Others traffic in it at the auction sale to which we have reduced marriage. That's why I, who tell you this, am a Pannetier as well as a Puymaufroy. That's why your papa dreamed of making you the Comtesse de Hauteroche. The past is breaking up and new groups are forming; but they are groups of the strongest—as always. To-day the strongest are the richest, first of all; that's the brutal fact."

"Oh, come! Money isn't everything, Uncle."

"Certainly not; it isn't everything. Only it's too much. Money isn't everything; but the whole human race is its votary. There is no counter-balance. It isn't everything; but all the other social powers crowd around wealth; even those that pretend to protect mankind are swept up. They say it has displaced brute force; but it only expresses brute force in other words. Someone has said that in the old days there was God against the world's oppressions. But I have always found that God is on the side of the strongest. Jesus himself tenderly reproached Him from the cross."

"Then the world is rotten?"

"No, my dear. The trouble is that the good are

isolated. They have exquisite feelings but not the energy to get together, to act. The others get together by self-interest, by cowardice, by their hurry to profit from every hour. And so generous sentiments find their place in the social system only if they make concessions which really destroy their value. They are compelled to admit that the strongest are always right. And yet ordinary hypocrisy is a confession of shame in the hour of triumph. That is what makes me optimistic about the future. I suppose this is all Greek to you. Mme. la Comtesse and the mothers that bring their little children to her parties haven't the time to think about these things, nor the ability. They go to the strongest by instinct, and their actions justify themselves. You have to swim with the current. If you go against it you are assured of defeat on earth, with a doubtful triumph beyond the grave—as consolation."

"You are hopeless, Uncle. Then what can I do? Go into a convent? Or live another twenty years in the hope of death?"

"That's true. I am an old man talking to your youth. And I have less right since life has given me its loveliest. I am paying; it's your turn to live. And it's only because I want you to live fully and nobly that I am trying to save you from the universal lie."

"Yes, I understand. But you yourself said that we've got to respect some conventional things. I think there must be good and bad in everything.

The world isn't perfect and Mme. la Comtesse isn't a heroine. But how can I judge humanity? You're very hard on people who come near me because you love me so much. Be more indulgent, Daddy. Since you are with me I have nothing to fear."

"I sha'n't be with you always. You will need your mother."

Then they talked long of Death, and Henri opened his heart to her.

The Comtesse de Fourchamps persisted in her tactics and never interrupted these long conversations. Puymaufroy was grateful to her for that. Harlé was also pleased for he had time to explain to her all his plans for becoming one of the merchant kings of France. He had taken it into his head to have her visit the factory.

"What for?" she asked, with cheerful indifference. "To see men with black faces stuck to horribly noisy machines, or pasty-faced men stirring some horrible concoction in your vats. Don't I see them coming out of their lair every night? That's enough. Napoleon didn't take people to visit his battlefields."

"Right. And what Napoleon didn't dare to do, I dare. That's progress. He killed eighty thousand men in one night at Moscow, and what for? Nothing to boast of in that! I give people life. That's worth seeing. And I give double profit to society, because I let people earn a living and I pro-

duce something that spreads civilization everywhere."

"I'll take your word for it."

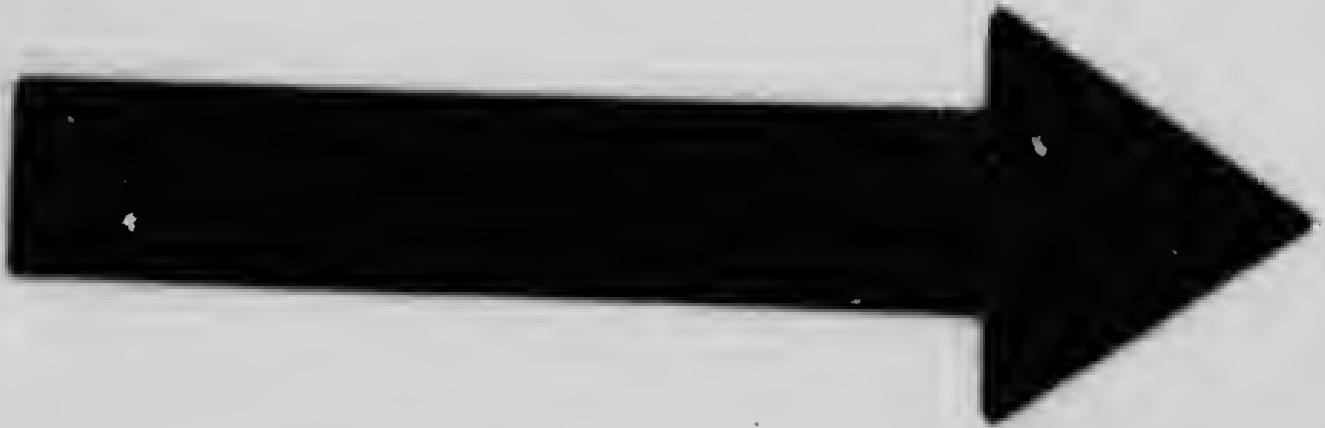
"That isn't enough, madame. I want to convince your eyes."

"Oh, persuade those who need persuasion. I do not."

"But everyone ought to know! If you don't want to see the paper coming off the rollers and folding up into neat little sheets for you to write on, at least come down and see my coöperative stores, my workers' cities, and my charitable institutions."

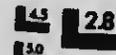
"I know you are good. That's all I need to know. My function is art, not industry. We women are decorative, my friend—or nothing. Your dividends are your affair. Let us be the ornaments of your life, and nothing else."

But finally he persuaded her and the party was made up. Everything in the factory had been swept up and polished and cleaned, but the comtesse could hardly suppress a movement of disgust. The woman of the world is popularly supposed to be at home wherever fate may land her. But the factory and the furrow are exceptions. The exquisite, artificial flower, on its wire stem with silken petals and velvet leaves, is dazzling, but it must be kept away from contact with nature. The comtesse was more of a spectacle to the factory than the factory could be to her. She passed with lowered lids under the



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ironic silence of the distant creatures at whom she would not even look. She went along, with little movements, among incomprehensible things of iron or of flesh and blood, vaguely consoled with the thought that such things had to be in order that she might shine in her glory. What, to her, were these men begrimed with coal or with paste?—these fellows disgustingly stained at the strainer or foul with motor oil; these women, so prematurely aged; the girls, the children, stupefied with the mechanical grind, twisted into an eternal repetition of the same gesture by which they made their living. No, they were nothing to her. They were at opposite poles.

Claudia was not embarrassed, for she was in daily contact with these people, who smiled and winked at her, slyly. They were friends. Dominic was the captain at the helm. His presence was the signal for an almost military attention. He was neither loved nor hated; they obeyed him. He asked nothing more. Outside the factory he was capable of being generous; within, he affected to be pitilessly just. There was no room for temperaments in his chart of work. Punishment followed swiftly on the fault. He allowed appeals and made reparation if he thought that justice had been violated. But even when he was merciful he was so harsh that no gratitude ever came to him.

In spite of everything the workers felt that Harlé was one of them, a friend of their work, who was put-

ting his effort into it with them. "He's part of the factory," they would say. And in truth it wasn't altogether flattery.

Harlé tried to show the party everything, but all that the comtesse could remember was that a tree became paper. It hardly mattered to her by what process the thing was accomplished.

A building which gave off acrid gases stood out of the line of their itinerary. "What's that?" asked Deschars. "What do you do there?"

"That's where we bleach the rags," said Harlé. "It's chlorine bleaching; the smell is awful and the gas would make you cough."

As he spoke the door opened violently and a man, shaken with a terrible cough, leaped from the spirals of yellowish smoke. They saw him lean against the wall, convulsed, his arms flung over his face. And as he stood erect again, after the fit had passed, a splash of bright red on the white plaster wall showed the habitual blood-spitting of workers in chlorine. It was so sudden and so tragic that all cried out at once.

"How abominable!" moaned Claudia. "Isn't it terrible to kill people that way? There are always people ready to die so that their families can live."

The superintendent who was accompanying the visitors had already come to the aid of the sufferer, who was led away, marking his steps with red blots.

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"They'll take him to the infirmary and give him some milk," said Harlé. "I never let my men stay more than four consecutive hours in the gas chamber. By giving them plenty of milk—and I see that they have it—I have had some who lasted quite a while, even years."

"Can't you get along without chlorine?" asked Deschars.

"No. I tried electric bleaching but it didn't satisfy me. For high-quality rags a bath in liquid chlorine is enough, and that's almost inoffensive. But rough rags for print paper have to have gas. It's a nuisance, but you can't get around it."

"So we must resign ourselves to it," said the comtesse, sadly.

"Our resignation is easier to explain than theirs," said Puymafray.

"They have to resign themselves to the inevitable," cried Dominic. "And at that, they get good pay. From four to five francs per day."

"Five francs—so as not to die of hunger; so that they can die of chlorine gas," Puymafray insisted.

"How long does it take you to spend all they make in their little lifetime of labour for you?"

"That's up to me. I get out of my factory—which represents my work and the work of others—as much as I can. I am the chief. The chief doesn't expose himself to the risks of the common soldier. He has other troubles; and other pleasures, if you

wish. Do you imagine I run no risks in the battle? I get killed another way, that's all."

"But it's the way that counts," said Claudia, sadly. "I know that we're all killing ourselves every day; that's life. But some ways of killing yourself are acceptable and some are so cruel. Perhaps it isn't necessary to inhale chlorine."

"Yes, it is. Just as you have to go into the cannon's mouth when the day comes."

"But, Papa, even the soldier has a chance of safety. But here, there's no future except death; it's inevitable."

"Well, and what about the infirmary and the hospital, and the aid society? You had better come and see what I am doing for my people."

And, in a hurricane of words, he dragged the party—suddenly become silent—to the annexes, where a wisely organized philanthropy was displayed. Everything was beautifully arranged from the crèche to the morgue. Humanity could go no further. All the arrangements seemed excellent. And yet, in spite of Harlé fanfares, the visitors seemed to be weighed down with vague, disquieting thoughts.

"We're all silent except you, my dear host, but you express things very well," said the comtesse, after a pause. "You are a benefactor of mankind. I hardly needed to get stained and dirty to find that out."

"You have to admit that I keep all these people alive."

"That's the law of life. The poor are happy because there are the rich to give them bread."

"Well, if I may say so," remarked Puymaufroy, with a smile, "it seems to me that they would get along without our kindness a lot easier than we could do without their work. I admit, Dominic, that if it weren't for you, François Bâty, whom we just saw spitting blood out there, would have to find something else to do. But there's always the land, open to everyone. And I am willing to admit that my farmers could spare my generosity while I should be seriously embarrassed without their rent."

"Mutual aid, I know," answered Harlé, crossly.

"And besides, if *you* don't work, *I do*, and I don't spare myself, either."

"Perhaps you expect more for your trouble than your employés do."

"That's because I am running the factory, I told you."

"There is more than one way of running——"

"Mine is to demand passive obedience."

"That's the simplest, to be sure. The trouble is that the people nowadays are beginning to figure out what their own interest is and then they say: '*We come in on this*'."

"Yes, that's the trouble. You're telling the truth with your little joke. I know better than they do

what's good for them, and above all I know what's possible."

"They won't always believe that."

"That doesn't prove that I'm wrong. I listen to them patiently. Sometimes I explain to the most intelligent of them what I am doing, and show them how my work is more than the fourteen hours they're whining about. I show them my risks and their lack of responsibility. I tell you I embarrass them considerably."

"You won't always embarrass them."

"We'll see. I laugh when they come to me with their unions. I tell them: 'My children, it isn't at all what you think it is. Get yourselves together in one union against us and we'll make a union against you. Then we'll see who's the stronger.' Then their heads go down."

"Some day they'll lift them up again."

"Then society must use the power it has to protect itself."

"Oh, Papa, you're not going to have soldiers with loaded rifles against these good fellows?"

"I'd be as sorry as you if I had to. But you will soon find out that force is the last resource in this world. The good fellows, as you call them, will only have to submit. As for the others, you have to make them understand one way or another."

"If you didn't," said the comtesse, "it would be the end of everything. You can't ask us to sur-

render to the barbarians. We've got to defend ourselves."

"I'm not sure what I am asking," said Claudia, "but I don't want people shot for me."

"Even your godfather, who is a philanthropist, will tell you that you can only live at the expense of others," said Harlé. "He just said that that's how *he* lives. It's a question of degree. I have won happiness for you; inevitably the price included some misfortunes. But when you know what I have given you, you will have a proper attitude toward the unhappiness which you know only through the experiences of others—thanks to me."

"You understand, Claudia," said Henri, softly. "That's exactly what you must never do."

The evening was not gay, for the factory obsessed them. Harlé felt that the comtesse was on his side, and tried to preach at Claudia under the pretense of arguing with Puymaufroy or Deschars. He had set himself methodically to killing all sensitiveness in her. According to his ideas of the future the girl must be a glorious daughter of the strongest. That was why he had opened all the windows that gave on the life of the world so that she would have ambitions to satisfy. Once her desires were aroused he would know what to do. He held in his hand the lever of future greatness. Could he stop in the arduous ascent for the feeble scruples of whining philanthropists? He hardly thought so, and was busy warn-

ing Claudia against the "feeble spirit" of her godfather who, he said, was consoling himself for his wasted life by discouraging others from action.

So Harlé developed his theme of the struggle for existence showing that you had to conquer or be conquered, and confessing that he was irresistibly inclined toward the former. Deschars had become astute and seemed to be afraid of approving or contradicting. Puymaufroy alone went valiantly to the assault; insisted that we must propose peace, not war; and that even in the thick of the battle the belligerents must conduct themselves in accordance with the dictates of humanity. Maliciously he sometimes turned to the comtesse for aid, and enjoyed her embarrassment at being solicited by both sides. Claudia, the judge of the contest, listened and spoke her doubts.

"I'm like Uncle," she said, "I wish it were possible to moderate this struggle between conflicting interests. I think Uncle is right when he said that all the power is in our hands."

"What you mean is that you want your enemy to be stronger so that he can hit back harder."

"No, if I wish that the enemy were stronger, it is because I wish that we weren't tempted to abuse our strength."

"Do you think, then, that I am abusing my power? Do you think that that whole organization of charity which I just showed you is a malicious tyranny?"

"I know that it is a good thing. Only, Papa dear, you're the only one who has the right to say how much each one shall get, and you know that you put conditions on your charity. Perhaps your men would like to have a word to say about that."

"Oh, ho! so you want them to get more of my share? Isn't it enough for the Government to think always of ruining me with its taxes and regulations of industry and all sorts of vexations which are passed every day by people whose least trouble is that they don't know anything about their business? Where is it going to stop? They are going to kill all initiative. They are going to kill liberty and destroy the possibility and the desire to get rich. Everybody will be ruined. Then there will be nothing but poor people. That's progress for you!"

"You'll see that we shall escape that catastrophe," said Puymaufray, "but I admit that we can't assure the liberty of the workers without cutting into yours, because your liberty means using them for your purpose."

"My liberty asks nothing but what it can take. My workers are free to save, to organize coöperative societies, to establish banks, and join unions against me."

"Well, don't you always tell them that if they form unions against you, you will form a stronger union against them?"

"Undoubtedly. However, they'll have the chance

of a fight. Can you deny that for the last fifty years we have been helping them and making their situation better?"

"Absolutely right. But all of those things which may be some good later on are now in the hands of the masters, and give him only another hold over their lives. And the struggle for life puts them all in your power."

"That's because they are all ignorant, undisciplined, incapable of getting along themselves. They don't even know how to use the tools that we generously hand over to them. Do you know why they are so weak? "Ah, now we're getting virtue mixed up in this. What do you think if it, comtesse, with your knowledge of the world?"

"I think, my dear marquis, that the vices of the people are very disgusting."

"Very well, that's the last word in modern philosophy. There is nothing else to say. The vices of the crowd are our vices, but without our elegance. We are distinguished by the manner of our dissipation or drunkenness. We are indulgent or severe according to who it is. It's a fine thing for us to have every pleasure that is allowed or condemned, and then to heap scorn on those that don't know how to clothe their vices decently!"

"There is something else," hazarded the comtesse; "these people are gross; you can't deny that. They're strangers to our refinements of joy and pain, and they

don't feel happiness or unhappiness as we do. They're of a different world."

"Do you think so? My ancestors, if I've got the story correctly, might be excused for thinking that there were two kinds of people on earth. But, since the Revolution, that seems rather difficult to prove. The Third Estate believed in good faith that they wanted universal justice on earth. But they very soon saw that ours was a good place to take and that seemed enough. And the only revenge we could see was to make ourselves bourgeois like our conquerors, to get back some of the things they stole from us; not to mention doing a little robbing on our own account. And now, look at the people, full of the sentiments of the old bourgeoisie, who want nothing more than to become bourgeois themselves. Well, all that seems to me to be pretty much one world. The same necessity for having and holding; and the only difference is in the means. The contrast seems to shock pretty ladies. I know that elements are fused every day. But Dominic taught me that under the changing names, through the revolution, one thing remains, the invincible union of the strongest, who, no matter where they come from, recognize one another as being 'the world' and find that that justifies them in setting themselves up above the others who are nothing."

"There ought to be a place for everyone," said Claudia, "but how? In my visits to the poor I find

some that are resigned, like beasts of burden. Others flatter me and think they will please me by crawling at my feet. And there are some with bad eyes who reproach me mutely with vague threats, and I sometimes think that, if I were in their place, I would be a rebel. When I hear them cry 'our miseries are too much for us, miss,' I know that what they mean is 'give us a little more place in the sun.' I look for an answer but I never find one. So I give money. Uncle is right; it isn't worth anything, because we have to begin all over again the next day, and I myself am not enough. So I'm discontented with myself and with others. And then I forget. My life is so easy, so beautiful. If I were to give up my pleasures, it wouldn't change anything, so I live like the dog that is bringing his master dinner, I snap up my bite of happiness. Am I wrong, Uncle?"

"It is not your duty to bring the reign of eternal justice on earth, my dear. Only keep alive this feeling of the wrong done by Fate, and your life will be illumined and warmed with acts of kindness. You will discover reality and you will learn the joy of giving a little of yourself to those who have fallen."

"Good will prevail," said Deschars, "only the forms of evil are so numerous and widespread that each man by himself thinks he is powerless, and despairs."

"Well, then," said Harlé, bringing the discussion to an end, "we've all got to live on the principle of

'Do what you can,' my dear Henri. That's what I am doing. I develop myself according to my abilities. If I need a greater field of activity than others, it is because I have a greater power to grow. I say it without false modesty."

"And what will you do with this power?"

"I'll find glory for myself, happiness for Claudia, and even, if you wish, solace for those who owe it to me that they're making a living by their work and mine."

"Fulfill your destiny, then, my dear Dominic. May your glory and Claudia's happiness and the benefits that you are spreading be as great as I wish them to be."

## CHAPTER VI

**P**ARIS was calling the Comtesse de Four-champs. She knew little more than on the day she had come, but at least the battle was engaged and she had increased her advantages. Her authority over Claudia held firm against Henri's efforts. That was the great lever to move everything afterward. She knew that Harlé was at her mercy. Henri, sure of Claudia, was less watchful, and was even disarmed by the little courtesies which he knew were insincere, but which still had their effect.

Like all conquerors, the comtesse undoubtedly exaggerated her power. Although she had not yet pierced Puymaufray's armour, she considered herself victorious, and only wondered how far she would care to push her game. Instinctively she made a deduction on Deschars's account. She wanted him in Paris so as to expose his possible pretensions to Claudia's hand and compel him to risk battle in the open and at his disadvantage.

"My dear sir," she said to him, "you can't imagine how grateful I am to you for not having any stories to tell. The traveller that has seen nothing

## THE STRONGEST

is a rare bird. Only I can't admit that you can put Paris and Benares on the same level. A trip around the Place de l'Étoile is just as strange, perhaps, and although I have no right to make comparisons, I dare say it is more amusing. Don't you want to come and try it?"

"Madame, all that I remember of my travels is that gestures change according to the latitude, but express the same human appetites, excited by selfishness or restrained by generosity. I have made a rather wide circle around the Place de l'Étoile and I have seen many spectacles under many skies, but I've always been chiefly astonished by the variety of the settings. So I cheerfully admit that the Champs-Élysées are as dangerous as the jungle. There are Hindus who take pleasure in seeing a man go out against a tiger. You will have none of these cruelties."

"I believe that you are capable of going out yourself, but I'd rather see you at grips with our own monsters."

"The pleasure of the Romans, in turning down their thumbs?"

"We are Christians, sir."

"True, we have changed the signs."

"And our feelings, too, if you please."

"Then I'll have the pleasure of finding that out, madame, and I anticipate it with joy."

In fact, Deschars's eagerness to follow Puymau-

fray made the lady think that her invitation was superfluous. Her vague suppositions about Claudia were confirmed. Most searching observation had shown her nothing; the young people seemed to be in each other's confidence, but nothing else. The trial of Paris was to prove.

Nanette came sadly to wish the comtesse *bon voyage*. "I'm angry at you, madame, for taking Monsieur Henri, but it is for his good. When you get him, keep him a long time. Loneliness makes him sad. If you could only make him recover his taste for Paris, he would be as young and gay as he used to be."

"I'll do my best, Nanette."

And so the countess left Radegonde.

Two days later Baron Oppert came back from his hunting in Galicia. As soon as he was back, Harlé went up to Paris. He was possessed by the thought of a prodigious industrial development. A simple idea, but very grand. A stroke of genius, the success of which, together with the indefinite growth of his factory, would give him such power in society that he could hardly think of it without getting dizzy. The paper-maker had opened his mind to the baron, who frankly showed his wonder at such a noble conception. Samuel Oppert, whose affection (paternal henceforth) for the countess led him into making confidences, had told her of Harlé's plans,

and had thereby deeply affected her strategy at Ste. Radegonde. When a man like the baron declared that Harlé was his equal, who could resist the temptation to take a part in the game?

While he was away hunting, the financier thought over the matter, and decided to put all his energy into it. Harlé, after having carefully considered all the chances in the combination, felt his enthusiasm growing with the aid of the great Oppert, and was eager to act. When he told Puymaufroy that his great enterprise was taking shape, and that its inevitable success would put him far above the vulgar ranks of the money kings, Henri could not help trembling for Claudia. How could he snatch her away from all this royalty? Henri needed only memories of his own youth to realize the risks his beloved child would run. He tried to make her understand, repeating what he had already said, renewing his warnings, which were useless because they were only theories. What influence could these bitter, disillusioned lectures have on a child who was eager for the satisfactions of life?

"Uncle," she said, to make an end, "I love you. What more do you need? Since you love me, believe in me, as I believe in you."

He found nothing to say.

After Radegonde was empty, Henri waited fifteen long days in the charm of his old house, haunted by

Claire's spirit. He was afraid of Paris, but he could give himself no account of his fears. He was comforted by the thought that Maurice Deschars would be with him. Not that he could expect advice or aid from this companion, since it was impossible to open his heart, but the force of love is such that even a useless friendship, by its mere presence, excites all one's energies as by an electric current.

The two men went riding through the woods and, brought close by obscure emotions, searched each other out, and attempted uncertain approaches to those things that were hidden in the depths. For each had his secret. Puymaufroy's was buried forever in impenetrable mystery. The other one's was pressing toward the light of day.

Deschars was timid, but one day, on a walk through the sand pits, he mustered up courage to speak.

"My dear marquis," he began, "I want to tell you something in confidence, and ask your sincere advice. You have known me since childhood; you've seen me grow up among these farmers, and you've frequently given me the benefit of your experience. I've just come back from a long absence, but I can say candidly that I am still the man you knew, and—I venture to say—loved. I've travelled in many countries, and if I haven't learned much, at least I know how people on earth live and that has given me a fair sense of proportion. My ambition is to

live usefully, if I can, and I believe that that is not so hard as people think. For there is evil everywhere, and though there are plenty of efforts to do good, they are always discordant."

"That is a calamity."

"Yes, but I've a whole life in front of me. I'm rich. For a country squire, I am very rich. My fortune was amassed by excellent people who never found time to live when they were on earth, and now I want to put their money to use which may justify their miserliness. I said that the efforts to do good were disorganized. Can't I coördinate them? That would be enough to satisfy my ambition. Haven't you told me a hundred times that the noblest dream was to build a house on the cornerstone of love? Why cannot I live this dream? Why shouldn't I try it after so many others? Many have failed, I know, but—without false modesty, and only judging by my intentions—I dare to say that I am worthy to succeed."

"Bravo, my dear Maurice, I can't tell you how glad I am to hear you talk that way. You give me back my youth."

"And what will you say if I tell you that I love your Claudia, and that I want to give her my name and my life?"

"You?"

"Yes, I. Your astonishment is the answer, isn't it?"

"No, I am surprised, that's all. You've been away for two years. It's true, you knew Claudia from childhood, but I never saw anything which would prepare me for this. And here you drop down from the Himalayas to tell me that you love her. You've only been here six weeks. I don't think I've been asleep, but I haven't seen anything."

"I expected you to say that. Shall I say that I was in love when I went away? I don't know. I was already drawn to her irresistibly. Neither you nor she suspected anything. With all my adventurous airs, I am not daring where women are concerned. The mystery of this new feeling made me more timid still, and then I wanted to conquer myself. Harlé with his millions, his ideas of greatness stood up before me, the barrier that could not be passed, and I'm afraid this obstacle has only grown greater with time. She herself knew nothing. To tell the truth, her ways of feeling and speaking often shocked and wounded me. I had already travelled. This time I decided to be absent a long time. I have come back. Not from dragging my tragedy all over the world; no. But I am bringing back the torment of a man who has left the better part of himself in the changing eyes of a woman far away. I see her again. I find she is more beautiful, more noble, with a new heart and soul. And I know that it is due to you, who love her. I love her."

"And you could pretend to be indifferent, to fool me, and keep Claudia herself in ignorance?"

"I had to throw Mme. la Comtesse de Fourchamps off the track. If that woman knew my secret, I should be lost."

"Yes, you have done well, but you and Claudia are both too dear to me. I must clear the road for you. Harlé is nothing but a piece of ambitious machinery, blindly dashing forward, crushing everything in his way. You, my poor friend, are not even in his way. To him you are nothing. What would he care for your honesty and candour and goodness? Your plan of life would make him laugh. What have you brought back from your travels to help him up the social ladder? Nothing. You are a passer-by, useless, a dreamer. All he'll ask of you is to get out of his way. I don't say that he can make his daughter take the man whom he chooses. But he is certainly strong enough to prevent her from accepting any one. Of course, I make an exception for a great passion."

"And she?"

"We must win her. Even I, who know her and love her, am hard pressed to tell you how. She is good, but she is sometimes weak and gives in to suggestions of the terrible people around her. She resists courageously; then she yields. Circumstances are very powerful against the will of the young. Claudia frequently wants to do the right thing and

can't, or lets herself be turned away by the temptations of her frivolous life. She doesn't understand the harm her father's millions are doing her—and her father himself, although he loves her in his fashion. It's not surprising. She isn't old enough for the profound love that comes from common suffering. Worldly pleasures attract this lovely child, and withdraw her far from the natural emotions of her heart. The world will be your enemy, my dear Maurice, as it has been mine. For you have guessed the truth. It is I who have changed her from what she was. All I needed to do was to bring her back to herself. Selfishness could not grow in that generous soul. Unfortunately, they satiated her with everything before she could understand anything. All she is curious about now is the splendour and movement of power. I saved Claudia simply by loving her. Now we must protect her. Do not fool yourself. She is surrounded by greed. The appetite for great dowries has killed in our young people all ambition to act. A good marriage is for them the fall of the loaded dice by which they gain joy and honour, the respect of the envious, and the esteem of the powerless. Gamblers are bold men. Are you fit for this game? I will be at your side, you may be sure. You knew that before you spoke, didn't you? But there is only one thing, and that is to make her love you. And what can a child like Claudia know of love?"

"But surely her heart must wake."

"Yes, and with all my heart I hope it will be to your call."

"Who knows? Love can awaken love."

"I've seen that. Your chance would be fine at Ste. Radegonde. In Paris with millions, and at twenty! I don't know."

"And the power of truth?"

"And the greater power of falsehood?"

"For a day!"

"Undoubtedly. But we are the creatures of a day."

"And what about my will? Have I fought for two years against myself to let myself be beaten now without a struggle?"

"You will fight gallantly, I am sure. We will fight side by side, and I will not spare myself, for I would die happy if I left in your hands what is dearest to me. However, do not under-estimate the forces of the world. Everything that can touch Claudia will be against you, except myself. That is your chance, my friend. But you're of a generation that talks and doesn't act. It isn't much better than the disorder of my own time. Come, leave dreams behind and live your love. I will help you if you help yourself. Into the battle!"

"I will be worthy of your help."

"That's nothing. We must win Claudia. All

I can do is to fight against the enemy. Meanwhile, you must make her love you."

"I'll try."

"Weakness. I hoped that you would say: 'I will make her love me'."

"Very well, then: I will make her love me."

"Here is my hand. May the day come when there will be three of us."

Puymaufroy was filled with joy and confidence for he feared nothing more than the crisis of marriage. Deschars's true and simple love made him supremely hopeful. They were two now in the work of salvation. However, he was not blind to the difficulties in their way. In spite of him, and in spite of herself, Claudia had turned toward another conception of life. What horizons would the simple love of the bourgeois country squire open before her, when on every side she would be tempted by offers to rule over Paris? Undoubtedly she would come back to the protecting wing of her godfather, who might save her from these vulgar calculations. But what a contrast between the apparent monotony of quiet happiness and the fairy dreams of the world! Henri reflected, and tried to compute his strength. He returned to the thought of Claire; he was supported by the advice of Nanette.

"How fortunate," said she, "that our Claudia should be loved by this fine man whom we ourselves have always loved. The good God in heaven owed

us that. Long ago I thought I was discovering something, but when he went away and stayed in savage countries, I thought I must have been mistaken. And then he comes back, just in time, I say. Only he must speak; he must show himself. I thought that he was hiding, and I asked myself: "What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing wrong, Nanette, except that profound love is timid. The other kind is eloquent and skilful and has all the chances of victory."

"That's why so many women are deceived."

"Yes," said Henri. "And for many other reasons besides." C

"As many as you like," agreed Nanette. "Only all I say is that M. Deschars had better be active, or all your preachings won't do him any good."

"I told him so. His ambitions are not going to dazzle Claudia. He'll have to make her love him, and that will need some effort with the young princess, who is always having incense burned before her. Perhaps Maurice is a little bit rusty, but I am sure his energy will come back as soon as he sees his first rival. And besides, I have seen many who tortured themselves at night and were bravest under fire the next day."

"Good. Only beware of the comtesse. That woman has different ideas which we don't know. She has begun by taking you to Paris under her hand."

"If I had to do it to save Claudia, I would unmask her," declared Henri.

"That's what you say. But when you come to do it, it may be too late. What can you say about her to people who know her better than you do? The strong need the strong, as M. Harlé says. They forgive one another everything."

"I will do what has to be done, but I will get Claudia away from her. And Maurice comes just at the right time for that."

"I don't like the thought of your struggling far away from me. One day I may drop in on you."

"And surely if I ask you to?"

A letter from Claudia allayed all the disquiet at Puymaufroy. She wrote:

Do come, Uncle dear. You've spoiled me too much with love. I find life stupid without your gentle scolding. Come, you will not be bored. Papa won't have time to quarrel with you because he is spending day and night with Baron Oppert. Busy, it seems, preparing something which will bring the Grand Mogul to my feet. The potentate will not be alone there—if I am to judge by the ardour of poetic youth, which is burning around me with the purest flame. What can all this disinterested homage mean? I ask you. At first I thought of the great beauty of my soul—of the soul I would have—if I listened to my uncle. But I am told that that is not enough, there must be something else.

If my eyes aren't open, it's not the fault of Mme. la

Comtesse, who is a perfect friend to me. It seems so wonderful that her advice resembles yours so much. I can't help telling her so sometimes; she laughs and seems happy. Uncle, you work miracles.

What isn't a miracle, is that I love you above all. I would be the most miserable ingrate if I didn't. But just because you know that I will not change, is that a reason for abandoning me much longer to the adoring enterprises of which I am the victim? Please have pity on a poor deserted divinity who needs your help.

Ask M. Deschars to make Nanette lend me the magnificence of India with which he was going to clothe her. I think I will need it this spring. I kiss you, Uncle dear, and Nanette.

This letter, read to Deschars, was a trumpet call. He left, mad with hope and, embracing his friend, whispered: "Au revoir, father," which made Puymaufroy tremble with joy.

A strange thing. Every day Henri discovered some new reasons for delaying his departure. What could hold him back, when Claudia was calling him, when after long despair everything seemed to foretell the success of the supreme effort? In spite of himself, the château, the village, the woods, the roads, all these silent witnesses of the spirit which had departed, held him imbedded like a stone in the soil, refused to give him back to the living. It was here that Claire had lived, here that they had loved, here that the same blow had struck both of them down.

He could not leave the spot without a struggle. But finally the day of his departure was fixed.

Pierre Quété, very solemn, and his brother Jean, Harlé's superintendent, came to bid him good-bye. "We couldn't let you go, Monsieur Henri, without coming down to shake hands."

"Thanks, Pierre; and you, Jean; you are good friends, I am glad to pass my last evening with you."

They sat down before the fireplace.

"Monsieur Henri," said the superintendent. "You weren't angry with me the other day for keeping out of your way when you were marching around the factory?"

"I know you, Jean. I knew that you weren't taking any risks."

"Oh, it was fine. The boss seemed very well satisfied. I heard him saying to the lady: 'I make this. I make that.' And I thought to myself 'We're making something, too'."

"Oh, come. No one imagines he makes paper all by himself. He meant to say 'we'."

"I know it, M'sieur Henri. Only he always says 'I'."

"The same as you, Jean. You have your grapes brought in and then you say: 'I'm making wine'."

"Why, that's true," said the other, laughing. "I didn't know I was a boss."

"You see, we're never wounded except by the selfishness of others."

"That's possible. But there is Pierre. He is a boss, too, down at the smithy. The men that work for him are his friends. They live the same life, have the same ideas, and pull at the same yoke. It's not that way between M. Harlé and us!"

"Big and little in that case, I suppose."

"Exactly. He is very big and we are very small. We have different interests, or even opposite ones, and our feelings follow our interests. You say that we are all making paper. Well, and who makes the division of profits? M. Harlé is all 'I' when it comes to that. There is a story about that: a lion that divides the quarry with his hunting companions and gives himself all the good pieces."

"And what about you, Pierre?" said Henri; "do you let your people fix their own wages?"

"No, but they fight about them, just the same. And then they see that I am not making hundreds and thousands out of them, like M. Harlé. I don't suppose I would be any better than anybody else. I suppose I am not big enough to do any harm."

"That's just it," said the superintendent. "My brother is one with his men. They stick close to each other. There isn't room for so much injustice, and it's easier to understand each other. And then, just because Pierre puts his money down on the table on pay day, he doesn't think that he is a benefactor of the whole world. To hear M. Harlé speak, you

would think he was St. Vincent de Paul. Is he a manufacturer of paper, because he wants to make money, or because he wants to give it away? If it's to give away, why does he keep as much as he can for himself? If it's to make money, why is he always telling us about his favours? The only time he is really sincere is when he says: 'I am the strongest'. All right, *let him be*—until the time when strength will be on the other side."

"And how will you accomplish that, friend Jean?"

"I won't do it. Nor anybody else. It will be the whole world. I don't know how. Everybody together will get the better of the few. Don't you see everywhere that people are growing? That's all we need. When they get the idea of bossing themselves they will find the way. The men were laughing the other day, to hear M. Harlé say to that woman from Paris: 'My men are happy'. What does he know about it? He buys them in the factory with his wages. He buys them outside with his aid societies, which fasten the chains on for life. They accept what he calls his benefactions and put them down to remorse. They accept and they wait. . . ."

"It's not a very lovely future that you are outlining to me."

"It's not a very lovely present that I see. And I don't think you could call it bad to put justice in the place of force."

"Certainly not. But in order to achieve it, even

supposing that our spirit and our will are enough, how many struggles, how many evils! We are old friends. You come to me in a moment of affection. And it's something like a declaration of war that I find deep in your hearts."

"But war, M'sieur Henri, they're making war on us. We are compelled to accept. Besides, it has nothing to do with you. If you think that just because you are a marquis you are on the side of the strongest, as M. Harlé says, you are fooling yourself. Perhaps your ancestors; yes, surely. And you yourself, I suppose—when you had your millions. But you didn't know how to make them grow, nor even how to keep them. Now, you're a proprietor—just as Pierre is a blacksmith—on a small scale. I mean in comparison with M. Harlé. And then, you are from the village, like ourselves. Everything that interests us touches you. You help your farmers without talking about it. And you don't always get your rent, in spite of Nanette, who won't listen to reason. It's simply because you are a good man. You love the small people since you are yourself one of them, and they love you."

"The fact is that I wasn't worth much before. I didn't know you or anybody. I knew nothing of men. I was too far from them."

"That's exactly what Jean said," remarked Pierre. "You were one of the strongest. When you saw that justice wasn't on their side, you left them. And so

we love you. What are you going to do in Paris now? You don't belong to that country."

"There are many countries in that country. The one in which I am going to pass a few weeks—or perhaps a few months—is the one that used to be mine. I agree with you, Pierre, my boy, that I shall not cut a brilliant figure."

"Oh, M'sieur Henri, that isn't at all what I meant. You won't need anybody to show you the way. My idea is that you have changed while all your friends remained the same. So you won't understand each other, and I am sure you will be unhappy."

"Perhaps that's true. But you don't think that I am going to put myself out to say what I think."

"That isn't going to help matters, M'sieur Henri," replied the smith, who having but few objects for his thought, divined many things. "You are not going to Paris only for amusement. You will have to try to get on with your people. It isn't easy when you feel differently. Then you will be at war, and there will be too many against you."

"And aren't you at war, you? Don't forget, I have the advantage of not needing anybody else in order to get along."

"We found our lot when we were born. We never knew anything else. Every man is in his own camp; that's another saying of M. Harlé. People are far from each other, as you said just now. So they can

misunderstand each other, and hate each other, and do each other harm without remorse. But you, you're different. They will say that you are deserting your class. You will be the enemy. There will be a league against you—all of the strongest—and you won't be able to do what you want to do."

"I don't want to do anything."

"So long as we are alive we always want something. You don't have to earn your living, but you want to love and be loved like everybody; more, since you are better. In Paris those who ought to love you won't. They won't even get to know you. And those who love you will love you less, because everything will turn them away from you. Wouldn't you do better to stay here with us?"

"I can't. I have to go."

"Really," said Nanette, "wouldn't you think that m'sieur le marquis was going to war? Thank God he came back from the war. Paris won't take him away from us."

"You are right," said Pierre. "It was friendship that made me speak. I don't know why, but I was sorry to see M'sieur Henri go."

"All we wish," said Jean, "is that he comes back happy."

"Who knows," said Nanette, dreamily. "Perhaps his turn is coming."

"For that," Pierre followed out his idea, "you mustn't put your happiness in other people."

Henri closed his eyes, to see again his eternal image. "Happiness," he said, "is only in giving yourself."

Their pipes had gone out and their glasses were empty. Henri filled them again for the farewell, and they gravely clinked. For simple folk there is something akin to the accomplishment of an august rite in this touching of glasses. Henri looked at the two brothers—silent, embarrassed—more moved than they wanted to say, and in spite of unhappy words, felt comforted by their friendship. The sincerest tenderness can only use the ordinary, indifferent words of courtesy. But the expression, gesture, silence itself, tell everything. When they shook hands they found nothing to say; with an indistinct "Au revoir," they separated.

The next day Nanette said only: "Write me and I shall know whether I ought to come." She pressed him tenderly to her heart, pitying him, since neither the greatest love nor the most beautiful friendship had brought him anything but misery.

The carriage went slowly down the road. Then, at a turn, suddenly disappeared. She could still hear the rolling of the wheels and the rapid trot of the horse. The winds carried the distant noise to the horizon. And Nanette, remaining alone, was free to cry.

## CHAPTER VII

**F**OR his ordinary trips to Paris, Harlé generally reserved a luxurious apartment in the Hotel Mirabeau. He had long ago given up the idea of a fixed residence, which he feared would be too troublesome. But his rising position gave him social duties wherein he saw a chance for future glory. Besides, Claudia, whose inheritance was already beginning to attract the dowry-hunters, could not remain in the hurly-burly of a hotel.

The Comtesse de Fourchamps had, therefore, little trouble in convincing the visitor that the hour had come for him to establish himself in Paris, in the centre of the world. Through her good offices a bargain was found: the princely home of a broker, suddenly obliged to realize all his wealth, had been left in the hands of Baron Oppert. In the midst of a great garden, along the Avenue Friedland, stood a heavy and pretentious marble structure. Harlé, who had been coached, was dazzled by its magnificence and the business was soon arranged. They decided to make it a surprise for Claudia. A month later the noisy extravagance of the place had been toned down under the eye of the comtesse. Harlé

wanted to duplicate his winter garden, with its precious waterfall, and fancied that a collection of orchids, bought at random, would give it an air of supreme refinement. He would gladly have given up his Rubenses and his Ruysdaels for what he could find in the warehouses. The comtesse dissuaded him. She even succeeded in preventing the purchase of a lot of armour on which Harlé had set his heart. Thanks to the firmness of the woman of the world the decorations of the house were kept within the limits of moderate splendour.

The masterpiece of the comtesse's taste was Claudia's apartment. It was full of light and colour. "A smile of spring," she said. When she had gone to Ste. Radegonde, the comtesse had announced that everything was ready. What she had not said was that she had taken Claudia into the secret, spoiling the climax in order to win Claudia's confidence. Even in the full flow of her confidences with Henri, Claudia faithfully kept her promise to be silent.

When Harlé came to Paris, he wished to go at once from the station to the Avenue Friedland. The comtesse disagreed, insisting that Puymaufroy must take part in the surprise. They had to wait for his arrival, so that he could see the little suite which was at his disposal. Finally the four friends rang the bell and an English butler opened the court of honour to their carriage.

There were flowers everywhere. The livery was

too new. There was an excess of wealth, in spite of the effort at restraint. It gave the sense of a very recent title, which had to display itself and conquer at once. Claudia's astonishment was well planned—too well perhaps. Henri rejoiced to see her clap her hands, go into ecstasies over the furniture and trinkets which she herself had chosen. He was grateful to the comtesse.

"You know," said Harlé, "but for Mme. la Comtesse you wouldn't be in the party. I hardly had patience to wait for you."

He was compelled to show his gratitude.

"I owe you a great pleasure, madame," he said, pointing to Claudia, who was loudly rejoicing in the Sheraton.

The comtesse smiled without answering, as if to say: "It isn't my fault if you misunderstood me." At bottom she couldn't help being proud of her facile triumph. The marquis, she thought, was yielding. And as for Claudia, the exuberance of her art of deceit seemed to justify the confidence of her teacher.

After they had seen and admired everything tea was served under the exotic foliage of the hall. Puymaufroy thanked them for offering him a suite, but announced that he had taken lodgings with Deschars in a hotel on the rue de Rivoli, and would not leave his travelling companion. The comtesse approved strongly and went into a heartfelt eulogy of

the young man. She had reflected on the possible chance of his flirting with Claudia. Harlé's refusal was certain, but she did not care to begin by a refusal and take the risk of making the girl obstinate. She thought it better to give the young man every chance—to urge him on with kind words and gain his confidence. She would arrange it with Claudia, discouraging her gently with the prospect of a happiness so completely cut off from the world that it would seem no happiness at all to her.

Harlé was rather surprised to find Deschars in such favour and asked Henri to bring him to the family dinner with which the palace was to be opened that evening. Baron Oppert had promised to come with his cousin, the Abbé Nathaniel, curé of St. Exupère des-Anges. The priest had had some undefinable part in the negotiations between Harlé and the baron. The signatures were already affixed; they were on the eve of action. While Puymaufray and Claudia were busy discussing matters of dress Harlé and the countess were deep in mysterious conferences.

Henri had come up fresh from his village to be shocked by the exaggerations of the prevailing styles; and it hurt him to see that Claudia carried them to extremes. It hurt him more because the atmosphere of Paris, with its temptations to coquetry, gave a provocative air to the marked beauty of the girl. He would have liked to be silent, for the continuous preaching of good sense is hateful to the

young, and has the further disadvantage of being always right. What was to be done?

With endless precaution in choosing his words he told her that youth and beauty were enough and that art only spoiled what it tried to adorn.

"Uncle," she answered, "look at the woodcuts of your own age and you'll see that women dressed just as absurdly as they do to-day. That didn't shock you. It's because you were young then, Uncle. Now I am young. Do me the justice of being indulgent."

"I love you, my dear, and that's enough. The pictures you're talking about are mannequins, not real women, who wouldn't dream of having their pictures in portfolios. The others wanted to attract attention. Would that they could have heard what people said! There is a limit to everything. Dress is merely a frame. Go down to the Louvre and see if the masterpieces are loaded down with useless ornaments."

"Oh, men don't know anything about it, I swear."

"Nevertheless, women always dress for men."

"Maybe," said the comtesse, who caught Henri's last word and came to Claudia's aid. "You must know, my dear marquis, that women dress for women, and that a man's opinion in this matter is worthless unless he happen to be a painter or a dressmaker."

"If you say so, madame, it must be true. All the same I'd like to ask you to help me cure Claudia of her excesses."

"Alas, I envy them!" sighed the comtesse. It was her policy to let Claudia slip, so that her tenderness would be appreciated in the midst of scoldings. "It's right for her age. Time will cure her better than we can."

"I know it," said Puymaufroy. "What makes me furious is that the youth of to-day puts all its exuberance into gloves and hats and feathers. In our time we carried our twenties in our hearts."

"And all this fuss because my sieves are too puffy."

"Ah, yes. It's all one. There is a costume to suggest folly just as there is one which can suggest the idea of living in the simplicity of one's self, which is beauty."

"If you're going to judge hearts by the cut of wool or silk, do you know what you ought to do? Come with us to the dressmaker to-morrow. You will check Claudia's fantasies as much as you please and Morgan himself may profit from your lessons."

"Why not?"

"I'm serious. Do come. You will have the first glimpse of my 'snowball' gown, which I am sure will defy your criticism!"

"Oh, yes, Uncle; come along. We'll rig up a mannequin in your style and I'm sure you'll fall back in horror before your own work."

"Excellent. I'll confront Morgan in person."

At eight that evening Baron Oppert and the abbé came into the little salon. The Comtesse de

Fourchamps was already there and a few moments later Puymafray came in, followed by Deschars.

"Well," said Claudia to the young man. "do you like Paris?"

"I like Paris to-night—very much," answered Maurice, "but I'm afraid of Paris to-morrow."

"And I thought you were a brave man."

"I thought so myself. You never know yourself."

"What frightens you?"

"The unknown. The noisy crowd with nothing to do, which refuses to be disturbed. You yourself, who seem, somehow, different from what you were at Ste. Radegonde."

"You are right. I am different. The joyful crowd that makes you angry has an effect on my soul. It attracts me. This morning my uncle told me to be twenty. I hope you won't refuse to take part in my pleasures."

"You are Mlle. Claudia Harlé, and you will never be refused pleasure."

"Do you know anything better than that?"

"Yes. Happiness."

The comtesse quoted the saying of a Chevalier de Boufflers that "happiness is permanent pleasure!"

"Yes . . . which renews itself."

"And where do you find that?"

"In those you love."

"That's very chancy according to what I hear."

You have to be born for that and find your fate. That's what you mean by 'those you love,' isn't it? That's a lot of trouble. We still have plenty of time. I want to have a good time first."

Meanwhile Baron Oppert was exchanging the usual formalities with Henri de Puymafray. The financier's star had begun to rise only after Henri had plunged into the abyss.

Henri saw before him a little bald man whose rosy face was framed in a silky white beard. A large mouth with a great upper lip under a little cynical nose smiled benevolently at some secret thought while the yellow eyes, shining with a cold light, shot piercing rays through the most impenetrable armour. His voice was soft and warm, with that oriental frankness of accent which the westerner will always suspect if he is wise. Under the appearance of generosity there was a remnant of ancient servility, the treacherous revenge of the conquered. There was the dream of treasure which haunts the Asiatic mind. He had an extraordinary power of attracting men and things, with the innate knowledge of how to get the most out of them. He had the vanity of a slave become king, with the most complete contempt for humanity, based on the belief against which no part of him protested—that the soul was as marketable as the body. With this he had the good features of disinterest. Altogether he was complicated and strong.

Far from denying his Jewish birth, Oppert prided himself on it, superbly. His favourite theme was the high antiquity of his race. "With Moses and Jesus we conquered the world," he would say again and again. He seemed to have become a Christian out of pride in Christ the Jew, as much as by the need for security which made Paul a Roman citizen. He did not hate the weak. He feared only that they would yield to the temptation to get together and revolt, whereby they must ultimately suffer. To prevent this misfortune he readily invoked the aid of the supreme means: force, "always most efficacious when it is abused," he said. "A little wrong for a great good," he would say when people protested against savage repressions. He was a born enemy of the vanquished, siding by nature with the strongest, and his only thought was to reap the utmost advantage from those whom he served. And if it happened that the law was lacking in curiosity about his strokes of genius, at least he never was lacking in gratitude and supported the law with all his moral authority.

His title was authentic, from the Pope, and he always said "we" when speaking of the nobility. His brother Simon, also a convert, had bought a Portuguese title for their father, in order to provide himself with an ancestor. The old nobleman had, however, been left in tatters and died on his pallet in the ghetto of Amsterdam without even suspect-

ing his grandeur. Samuel Oppert refused to recognize this Portuguese title and remained a baron of Christ as before. In spite of the announcement notifying the world that the Oppert dynasty counted two generations of nobility at least, the Roman baron never forgave his Portuguese brother for buying his title "dirt cheap." It seemed to lower the value of his own. He could long ago have bought himself a dukedom, but as Paris did not yet recognize his baronetcy he left that innocent vanity to the younger sons of old French families.

The world, to be sure, was not too particular. What the world saw was that the baron counted his millions by hundreds and his brother only by ones. Since it is wrong to despise the poor, Count Simon was fairly well received and his daughter married an Austrian prince. But the baron exercised sovereign power. Governments called him into consultation; pretenders counted upon him. He was the hope of the upper classes, the fortress of those modern aristocracies which base their glory on the double advantage of high or low commerce and the old tradition of the superiority of blood.

Such a man was bound to inspire immense respect no matter what his beginnings had been. In addition his brother, the abbé Nathaniel—a tall, stooping Galician—made clear to all eyes that the approval of the Church was given. He was the go-between for financial negotiations.

Puymaufroy quickly noticed the harmony between the manufacturer, the priest, and the financier. He thought nothing of it, for he was busy watching the comtesse whose own eye was on Deschars.

Dinner was served. They went into the dining room, where the walls had disappeared under plants and greenery. The display—everything brand new, the silver and crystal glittering amid the orchids and roses—hurt Maurice as if it had been a flowering wall raised up between him and Claudia. There were exclamations of admiration in which Harlé revelled. The baron asked for explanations. He got them. Harlé took the house apart under the eyes of the guests, detailed all its perfections, left out nothing. His discourse continued until the roast, and then he stopped only to catch his breath. The comtesse skilfully shot in a remark about a burning question of the day and the conversation became general.

The question of the day concerned a Mlle. Lucienne Préban, the very ugly daughter of a very rich sugar refiner. Some foppish little under-secretary of state on the lookout for a good thing had told her that he loved her.

“Ah, there are many of you that do,” the unhappy girl answered. “I admit that I like you very much. But what can I do? My fortune imposes duties on me just as the throne imposes duty on royalty. We haven’t the right to do what we please with ourselves.

Pity me! What can I do with all these princes of mine? You'll see; they'll make me marry one some day in a fit of boredom. If you were even a duke your love would make me very happy. Perhaps Fate will arrange some revenge for us. You have a great destiny before you. Let us be patient, my friend."

The discomfiture of the young politician, much advertised by Lucienne herself, caused great amusement. She was known to be secretly in love with a moustached Levantine.

"That girl's not a fool," cried Harlé. "I detest those puppies who try to get in with us because they happen to be playing second fiddle in the Chamber. You applaud a tenor. But the composer is the real 'Master' as people say. All these politicians do is to sing the words we put down. I don't like people to forget that we are the composers."

"You're right, my friend," said the baron; "we do give the artist his material. But that isn't an argument against our interpreters. Rossini and Wagner need singers. You see, we're modest, simple men of action. We are satisfied with the realities of power and leave the official pomp and circumstance to others."

"Perhaps we're wrong," answered Harlé, haunted with political ambitions.

"Perhaps. We use the movements of humanity for our own ends. But we might as well confess

that the impulse doesn't come from us. People have to believe that they are going where they are not going. To make them obey us we've got to excite them with some sentimentality, and we order the speakers and writers and artists to furnish it. That's what people stupidly call 'the ideas which lead the people.' Our art is to choose between these fantasies and use those which suit our purpose. It isn't necessary for these ideas to be——"

"True," said Puymaufroy, softly.

"Exactly," answered the baron, without moving an eyelash. "The truth, as you understand it, can be food for only a few. Prophets, poets, forerunners, as we say nowadays—people who'll be understood later. The crowd lives by the half truths which you call lies. They are the prejudice of the crowd in favour of a safe life, and we ought to reward all those who create these prejudices and put them into circulation. They serve the common good and increase the power of the élite. So I'm all for Dumouzin who wanted to marry Lucienne Préban. He was a member of my hunting party and his only mistake was that he didn't ask my advice."

"Dumouzin," said the countess, "is one of my friends. His adventure with Lucienne Préban has done him no harm. It puts him in the ranks of the great marriage-makers."

"And so," asked Puymaufroy, "this gentleman is publicly known to be negotiating the sale of his

charms. And when the Church has set the seal of its blessing on the contract, it will be a title of honour."

"There you are," cried the baron. "That's one of those truths which I was talking about. All right for a dozen or two exquisite souls. I admit that, in accordance with divine morality, Dumouzin will not go without rebuke, and some of his contemporaries with him. But the money market will flourish just as usefully among us. The sale, as you call it, is an accepted transaction, and I say it's somewhere between vice and virtue. The law doesn't attempt to punish all moral failings. Doesn't it rather admit that certain faults are to be tolerated and even honoured, so that life is possible without the continuous effort to be perfect, which would be too much. The great oligarchies were based on wealth, originally. So we mustn't look too closely at any transfer of money. Because that's the essential thing if you're going to keep up the power of money—in the interests of the poor, whom it keeps alive."

Henri was silent; he thought of his own millions, ingloriously strewn over the streets of Paris. Harlé approved, noisily. When the dessert was served he began again to sing the praises of the wonders he himself had accomplished. He could not refrain from calling attention to the monstrous peaches.

"I know them," said the baron. "Beautiful, but tasteless. A lesson to the poets who write only about beauty."

Then, turning to Deschars:

"And you, traveller, can't you tell us something of what the pagans think about marriage? You could show M. Puymaufroy how far we have progressed under Christianity which makes marriage a sacrament. Didn't you ever see a husband purchase his wife, in Asia?"

"Yes, baron," the young man answered. "It's only in Europe that I've seen the wife buy the husband."

They cried out at his words, which were generally considered to be in bad taste. Claudia seemed particularly shocked, and her irritation increased with Puymaufroy's evident approval of Deschars.

"You could dirty everything by saying that," she said bitterly, "if you're going to judge only by appearances. Apparently a poor millionaire's daughter can't marry like any one else. You say that she's being married for her money. Well, you have to marry for something, for beauty, or character, or wealth, or whatever you please. Perhaps the best insurance for a long life together is that conditions should be equal. Lucienne will bring her millions; he will bring his great name, or his ambitions, which need the lever of wealth. And look, you call that agreement buying and selling. The law calls that a contract, and that's right. Surely we're all free to dispose of ourselves to the best advantage."

"That's the way to talk," shouted Dominic, heartily satisfied.

"Yes," answered Puymafray, "that's the philosophy of the age. The only thing we forget is love."

"No one denies love, my dear marquis," said the countess. "But who knows when it will come?"

"May be there's a shepherd somewhere up on the Alps who would be my ideal, and I his," insisted Claudia, vexed with her uncle's reproaches. "But before I can get to him, I'd have plenty of chances to break my neck. And then, suppose there wasn't any shepherd."

"Fie! Young and afraid!" said Puymafray in a shaking voice, as if to himself.

"You see, M. Deschars," said the comtesse, "that wit isn't enough. You have to be logical, too."

"At least you will admit that we put the wrong names on things," answered Maurice. "And besides, I should say that all these discussions about love are futile. Because even the hardest of us changes his ideas when he is touched with love. Those who worry about the contract, since that's the official word for it, simply show that they do not love. We love when we can; and when we do love, rich or poor, all is well."

"All is well for how long?" demanded Claudia.

"For a time. That's a great deal to start with. Our life isn't so long."

"That's it," said the baron, cheerfully. "You youngsters can make the old ones ashamed. M. Deschars has uttered the great secret that puts us all in harmony. All men are alike, let me tell you, because I know them. All of them do the same thing in marriage and in everything else. They act in accordance with their temporary interest. Those who do otherwise either do not count, or they repent. And then, after they've acted, they build up a theory and claim that logic justifies them. However, under their acts, under their words—which are only external and I might almost say indifferent things—there flourishes obscurely in the depths of our soul something essentially pure and essentially beautiful—even in those that have lost the best part of themselves in the thickets of life; it is the need for disinterested feeling, for love, as you say, which seeks ever its match. And if these two blossoms meet in the obscure conflicts of life, life flowers magically. It is a chance. If they do not meet, then each one must work his way out, adapting himself to chance encounters, to the changing but necessary conventions by which the divine law is accommodated to human frailty."

"Bravo, baron," cried the comtesse, mockingly. "I didn't know you were a poet."

"The race of David is a race of poets, madame, which doesn't prevent it from being practical at times."

"And what is your conclusion, dear baron?" asked Harlé.

"Ah, the conclusion, my friend, is very different from M. Deschars's conclusion. He insists on confusing the social permanence of marriage and the passing of a poetic dream. I distinguish sharply, without demanding the complete sacrifice of poetry. It would be difficult to be more precise and the abbé, who's watching me, would not permit. Be calm. Apart from the sacrament, concerning which the Church knows best, how can any one deny that marriage, in our society, is above all the setting for a play which is acted in our own hearts? I don't say it *ought* to be that way. I state the fact, that it *is*. The abbé preaches that it ought to be different, and I agree—thoroughly. Let our young people make us a new world."

The dinner came to an end. Puymaufroy was silent, thinking of the incredible mixture of contradictory sentiments in the soul of the poet-financier, thinking of the ravages that his cynicism could work in the soul of a young girl. Deschars—discontented with himself and with everything—laughed harshly, his nerves sadly torn. Claudia gave each one a branch of apple blossoms, which had been strewn over the table, and they walked into the conservatory processionally, shaking off flakes of light.

"You might think it was a pagan festival," murmured the abbé, much embarrassed by his branch.

"Yes. It is the festival of the Spring," remarked Claudia. "But look, M. Deschars, look what endures." She showed him the naked branch, let it fall at her feet with a gesture of melancholy, and then, as if to escape a bitter memory, hurried to join the others.

"True," he answered. "But the branch flowered once. Life, said a great poet, is to flower!"

"Life is to endure."

"According to that, a muslin rose would be more alive than the original."

"It deceives you. That's enough."

"No. No. There is no lie that can stand against the truth!"

"Then didn't you understand what the baron said just now?"

"Oh, yes. He is trying to mingle truth and falsehood—so much of one, so much of the other—as you need them. He answered himself because he told us that we always find a logical explanation of what we have already done."

The comtesse, passing, on Harlé's arm, heard enough to realize that the encounter was on, and that Deschars had not had the advantage to begin with. The time lost by Henri she had turned to her gain. She was solidly established in Claudia's friendship, seemed to the girl to be a guarantee of independence, a support against the sometimes imperious demands of her father or the "wild ideas" of her godfather.

"You are beautiful, intelligent, and rich," the comtesse would tell her. "The world will belong to you. You must be free to decide your own future. What would be the use of all these endowments if you couldn't take advantage of them yourself? Will you choose to rule over the world, or to bury yourself alive in a dream? That's your affair. Your father and your 'uncle' are of different opinions about it. You will bring them together simply by following your own desires. They both of them love you well enough to be on your side at the end. In any case you can count on my friendship to help you in everything."

These words bore fruit, and all the more because she was a clever counsellor. She never imposed her judgments. She limited herself to provoking questions; and her answers, although she professed indifference, were decisive.

While they were taking coffee in the conservatory and Harlé was describing his waterfalls and electric lights, Deschars took the first opportunity to tell Claudia that she would receive a case of Indian cloths on the next day. Claudia was sorry that she had vexed her uncle and took the occasion to make peace. She held out her hand to Deschars and said:

"So you're not too angry at me for the silly things I said?"

"They weren't silly. They were what everybody says."

"That's the same thing."

"Not necessarily. It's quite possible that the sentimental ones are wrong."

"You don't believe that."

"And you?"

"I don't know what I believe. I'm a poor muddle-head. Sometimes I talk against my own thoughts, so as to get them clearer to myself. And all I do is to make Uncle unhappy, and I love him and he loves me more than I deserve."

"Your uncle knows, you well. He knows that your heart——"

"I tell you that I myself don't know. One time or another everybody seems right—my uncle or the others."

"Perhaps we ought to take both sides?"

"Oh, then you aren't prejudiced against the world?"

"How can you be prejudiced against the society of your own fellowmen?"

"Well, it appears to me that my uncle is condemning the whole universe. And it seems that the pleasures of life drag me away far from him, while my heart remains his."

"What do you call the pleasures of life?"

"I don't know. I have to live outside myself. I am attracted to others when I want joy."

"Oh, well, that isn't bad. All we need to know is: Who are the others?"

"Others?—that's the world where I live, where I

have lived, and where I will live; those of my own class, if I must say the word."

"That's the whole question: those of your own class. That means twenty, or thirty, or maybe fifty people whom you couldn't even name at one time and for whose opinion you are going to live. At bottom you don't think very much of them. No matter! They have the same salons, the same dresses, the same rules of living, the same conventions of speech, the same surface tastes, and these count more than anything else. But there is another humanity besides."

"St. Vincent de Paul?"

"You don't have to go quite so far. Simple goodness isn't quite so extravagant as people say it is. Besides, contact with our fellow creatures isn't always a matter of money. Your hand isn't empty if it is offering friendship. There's an exchange of hearts, too, by which we live a higher life than our own. I have seen you being good to others. Haven't you felt what you were getting by giving? When you will be unhappy, who will console you if you have never given consolation?—who will love you if you haven't loved?"

"To love is to suffer, Uncle says."

"Ah, yes. But he will also tell you that it is to know the highest happiness. The egoist is afraid to suffer and so loses his chance to be happy."

"So, instead of arming ourselves, we ought to surrender to sorrow?"

"Whoever is invulnerable under his armour will not suffer, but he will not live. The briefest joy of life pays for the longest-drawn-out misery."

"So again we have to decide for ourselves before we're old enough to know."

Claudia was gay and charming all the evening and Henri forgot the painful impression of the dinner. She gently drew him under a huge palm and there kissed him with a full heart.

"Uncle, dear, will you forgive me again? I said things that hurt you. But isn't it better for me to talk wildly and foolishly than to keep down the ideas I get from the world?—they make me worry about my future, too. When I speak the way I did I want you to contradict me, that's why I speak. And when I see how sad your eyes get, that does more to bring me to my senses than anything you could say."

"I haven't asked you to be anything but yourself, dear."

"That's what's so hard, because the world wants me to be *it*."

"Both of us can resist."

"Yes. But that's easier for you than for me. You aren't tempted because you know everything and everything attracts me because I want to know."

That's why you must be very indulgent, as you are. Did you notice what a simple little gown I put on just to please you to-night? I don't want to lose my reward for that. To-morrow you're coming to Morgan's with us and you'll underwrite every dress I buy. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Ah, an idea. To-morrow I'm going to get a box of Indian material from M. Deschars. Suppose I send them down to the shop and we'll ask him to be there. What do you say? It'll be magnificent."

"Excellent. He'll be very glad."

"Fine. Come at four o'clock, and let Maurice come at five. Now another kiss, the comtesse is going."

The Comtesse de Fourchamps was leaving, knowing that the baron and the abbé were counting on a conference with Harlé. She hadn't missed anything of Claudia's innocent tricks. She looked over at Deschars and said to herself: "Go on, go on, my child. I'll give you rope and rope and more rope, until with my help you'll hang yourself."

The moment the three men were left alone the abbé burst out:

"I have news from Rome. News giving——"

## CHAPTER VIII

**T**HE day was a memorable one at Morgan's. Precisely at ten, when Morgan—superior, calm—came in, it was discovered that Mélanie, his premier mannequin, was absent—and for good. She had come up from the country, had schooled herself and starved herself, insisting on making herself an honest living. She had succeeded. And now Morgan held in his hand this note:

MY DEAR M. MORGAN:

I have decided not to try on any more gowns at your place—except those I order for myself. I cannot forget the services which we have rendered each other, so I will come this afternoon to choose some models.

As ever yours,  
MÉLANIE.

P. S. Possibly you owe me some money. Please distribute it in my name, among the girls in the shop.

All morning the shop hummed and buzzed, and Morgan had to appear again and again at the door to demand order. It was nearly three o'clock, the mannequins were trotting out in front of a delegation

of Chicagoans, when the name went up—like an electric shock—"Mélanie!—she's come."

With a confident, modest step the young woman made her way down the hall, smiling vaguely at the admiring doorman with whom she had been friendly but yesterday. Everywhere, at every curtain, from carpet to ceiling, eyes followed her. They were opened wide with malicious pleasure (for Mélanie's long adventure in the paths of righteousness had not been popular), or with respect. Mélanie did not care: she greeted them as usual. She was dressed in a blue tailor-made suit with a waistcoat of white piqué, prettily setting off the authority of her figure. Her hat was a bit "sporty" but a white veil softened the effect. She did not even wear a bracelet. The good taste of the débutante was loudly approved.

"You can see she graduated here," said her comrades, very proudly.

Mlle. Juliette, the forelady, came to meet her, very stiff and dignified. As Troy pressed upon the ramparts to see Hector and Achilles race around the walls, so all the House of Morgan stood—in silent, closely packed ranks—deserting the astonished Americans, to attend the unheard-of event. Mlle. Juliette, with her discourse upon her lips, was within three paces of Mélanie when the latter, smiling candidly, stepped aside and disclosed the Prince de Luques, who was with her. Before Mlle. Juliette could recover from her surprise the prince, who was

not one to be stopped midway, saluted her as Louis XIV might have greeted a maid on the back stairs at Versailles, and stepped nobly with his companion into the famous white Psyche room.

"Tell Morgan we're waiting for him, won't you?" he said, casually.

And Morgan came. The Prince de Luques was too valuable. He was one of the most thoroughly ruined men in France, yet his expenses were magnificent. He had, at the age of sixty, an all-powerful reputation in the foreign colonies of Paris as the great "introducer" to the salons of the French aristocracy. And since he was pilot and adviser to millions he could not prevent dressmakers and other shopkeepers from being grateful to him. Morgan considered all this. He considered the certainty that Mélanie's orders would never be paid for. But he came. And when the Comtesse de Fourchamps came with Claudia they had to wait for the master artist to appear.

"Ah, madame," cried Juliette, as soon as they had come in, "you could never guess what's happened. I'm really in a dreadful state." Then, without giving her noble client time to ask a question, she told her in one gasp all that had happened.

"Admirable!" cried the comtesse, radiantly.

"Can't we get a look?"

"Yes; presently, when they go out."

Morgan appeared.

"My compliments, Monsieur Morgan," announced the comtesse, "the end of Mélanie for you is as honourable as her beginning."

"It's quite Parisian," said Morgan, thinking of the contrast with the début of the comtesse for whom he had opened an unlimited credit account at once.

"Tell us that there's nothing behind it. Everyone will think you arranged it on purpose."

"No. It happened, of itself; and that's what's so beautiful!"

The fitting began. Claudia was a martyr, heroically adopting the stiff attitudes ordered by Morgan, letting herself be pushed and twisted and turned. And always the question: "Is that all right?" brought back the answer: "Not yet." She flung her head at the reply; and the mirror, instead of reflecting the awaited perfect line, gave her back the image of her pouting face and her nervous little yawns. She grew weary of standing and urged the fitter to hurry. "If I hurry it won't be any good," replied the woman, calmly. And when it happened that the comtesse and the fitter differed, Morgan was sent for again, and Claudia had to stand still long moments until her critics were agreed.

While she did her duties conscientiously the comtesse watched the door. And when she heard the light tapping of little feet followed by the dragging footsteps of the prince she raised the curtain and stood in the embrasure with noble effrontery. Mélanie

passed, putting the virtuously stiff comtesse completely out of countenance with her most innocent smile. The prince, haughtily *distrain*, saw nothing, his gaze lost in space. Claudia had leaned her head on the comtesse's shoulder and received part of Mélanie's smile, to which she answered with a mutinous shake of the head.

"Well. I don't see what's so wonderful in that!" she cried out. "She's swagger, that's all. That's very good, too. Uncle says that frankness is the highest virtue. He would be pleased with her dress, which is much more discreet than mine."

"My dear child," said the comtesse, "Mélanie shows excellent tact in trying to atone for the extravagance of her conduct by the simplicity of her dress. You have nothing to conceal, so you can properly pique curiosity with your frocks."

"That's what Uncle disapproves of; he calls them provocative clothes. He says that in other years young girls dressed simply and only women like Mélanie attracted attention with their clothes."

"Perhaps. In any case that's no longer the fashion. Let the old dress old-fashioned. You, dear, you be young."

"Well, and here Uncle's coming to dress me like——"

"Oh, come, Claudia, you're not going to let him dress you like a nun?"

"I don't want to hurt him."

"Quite right. But you must understand that all these things are just talk with him. Only another way of regretting his youth. He would be desolate if you obeyed him and would demand a bit of gaiety at once. When he comes in, presently, we'll tell him he's too late—that your frocks have been sent down to the sewing room. And then we'll distract his attention with all those things that M. Deschars is sending over."

"Yes. But when he sees——"

"That's easy enough. You'll say: 'Look, Uncle, see how I yielded to your wishes. I have stripped off everything that could shock your Empire taste. He'll laugh—and believe that you really have sacrificed a lot for him, so he'll pass the rest.'"

"Is that what you meant when you told Juliette to scale up the colour scheme?"

"Exactly! A little souvenir of the impeccable Mme. Récamier won't displease the marquis. Remember, she was interested in chimney-sweeps."

"Oh. So we dress for chimney-sweeps."

"For them and much more, for the rest of the world. Our first law, my dear child, is to please. And when you're twenty years old you want the admiration of many. Why do you imagine you were breaking your back in front of that mirror for two hours? Was it for the futile pleasure of being criticized by us, or was it in the hope of attaining a perfection in your clothes which would make you

look just as you want to look? Don't you want to be beautiful any more?"

"Oh, yes. As beautiful as possible."

"Well. Beauty is a conventional idea which changes with time and place. Your friend Deschars will tell you that an Indian girl isn't considered beautiful unless she has a silver ring in her nose. Why shouldn't our artistic costumes be as respectable as that? Let us amuse the eyes of our contemporaries so long as we can charm their hearts."

Juliette came back from another room with Puymaufroy.

"My dear marquis," cried the comtesse, "you're late. Or perhaps *we* came too early. It works out the same. Claudia couldn't stand all day with her arms in the air. I promised to save her from your displeasure. You must forgive me, not her. Besides, we came down a lot from our extravagances just to please you."

Claudia played her part perfectly.

"Madame," said the marquis, "it's the best thing that could have happened. Undoubtedly my criticism would have been stupid, because I am ignorant of these things."

"The only criticism I accept is from experience. A dress must dress you. What are all our frocks but a concession to the infirmities of the masculine heart which refuses to be content with a beautiful soul?"

"Ah, then why construct such elaborate dresses

which no man can analyze? I am one of your admirers, and yet I couldn't say how you were dressed yesterday."

"That's just why your criticism is worthless. I told you, we dress up for women. However, in spite of the weakness of your eyes, you know whether the whole effect pleases you or not. What does it matter whether you know why and wherefore, so long as we know?"

"Didn't I tell you I'd say something stupid?"

"The object of art escapes you. All men are that way."

"You will admit that a life passed in front of a mirror exaggerates your personality and deforms it by giving a false point of view. I wanted to save Claudia from that disease."

"Are you sure that men don't array themselves as carefully as we do? It's only a difference of means; that's all."

Meantime the mannequins were coming in and posing in various attitudes in front of the marquis with an amusing air of saying: "Look at me." With a brief word the comtesse gave her opinion or decided what would not do. Claudia listened attentively, trying to fix things in her memory. When the seance was over they were ready to admire the snowball gown, and Deschars who had come was allowed to be present. When the mannequin came in there was a cry of wonder. Clusters of silk crystals on a field

of hoar-frost sown with icicles, and then feathery puffs of white flakes from which emerged the triumph of the flesh.

"A flower seen in a tempest," said Morgan.

The comtesse called the tall young girl with the chestnut hair, and began moving her around as if she had been an artificial model. With an obvious contempt for the youthful beauty of the girl she explained the changes which she had worked out.

"It seems a little confused to me. The theme implies more unity. So I've taken out this whole flounce. (Around, please, miss.) My idea is a frozen cascade from the shoulders down to the snowfall at the feet. This hardly gives you the idea."

Puymaufroy had to admit that the Snowball would be a perfect masterpiece and Claudia noted the word as a confession of defeat. Decidedly he had not got the better of the comtesse.

Deschars announced that the trunk had been opened in the Psyche room and Claudia led them all in to see.

In truth it was a feast for the eyes. Brocades so precious that the thought of their cost in human life was stupefying; gauzes like sheets of light, colours of flame in burning streaks; flashes of swords, spangles of gold and silver dream flowers on purple backgrounds, the seeds of spring on an azure field; magic. Claudia, dazed, looked at them with open-mouthed astonishment.

"Why, it's madness!" she said. "How could you collect this treasure?"

"By thinking much of you," answered Maurice. "Only the meeting and clashing of colours is worth anything. You ought to see these things there in the sun."

"Even in our fog there couldn't be anything more wonderful. I don't know what to say. Papa will let me accept them only because you are a childhood friend."

"These things have no value except the patience put in the work of collecting so many bits from everywhere."

"I'm grateful to you just the same. Uncle, you aren't saying a word."

"I'm overcome; and displeased with Maurice for spoiling you." The Comtesse de Fourchamps was so fascinated by the dance of colours that her artistic approval overcame her strategy.

"Mr. Traveller," she said, "you're to be complimented without reserve. It's wonderful."

Then, to complete her eulogy,

"Geneva and Lyons are superior to everything. But exoticism has the savour of the first moment, it surprises the imagination. I'm absolutely dazzled."

Each piece was passed in review and admired. Claudia's shining eyes, her wonder, her cries of joy were the best reward for the young man. They

spent a charming hour draping the stuffs on a mannequin who had been summoned.

When Morgan was asked to give his opinion he delivered a lecture. He explained that the aesthetics of the North alone asked a woman to show, at certain times, her arms, her neck, and her shoulders, while the dreamy Orient, with the imagination of a voluptuary, saw in a cloud of starry veils forms which could be clothed in supreme perfection. They were two conceptions of the art of concealing in order to reveal.

"Yes, but how can we make use of all this wealth?" demanded the comtesse. "You can't get yourself up like a dancing girl for a walk on the Bois."

"There's interior decoration," replied Morgan. "Or a costume ball or *tableaux vivants*."

"*Tableaux vivants!*" shouted Claudia, "that's the idea! You always have some poor people to help. You'll organize something, won't you? It'll be absolutely unparalleled. We'll dazzle the whole world and we'll do good at the same time. This time you'll be pleased, won't you, Uncle?"

Henri assented silently.

A salesgirl came in to tell the comtesse that M<sup>r</sup>.e. du Peyrouard was in the next room and wanted to come in to pass the time of day.

"What, Louise here? Ask M<sup>r</sup>me. du Peyrouard to come in. M. Deschars, you don't mind showing your Indian things to my friend?"

Maurice nodded.

Mme. du Peyrouard was the sister of Étienne Montperrier the young deputy, a potential Cabinet member, whose eloquence had so often struck down the opposition—which always rose from its ashes.

They were the children of a lawyer from Limoges who was known as a republican in the days of the Empire. Proscribed, banished to Switzerland and called back, the man of law had become a figure in the opposition and would cheerfully have died for the Republic if the people had wished it. Instead, the people made him a senator, when the Republic was established and later, when a coalition defeated him, the Government made him a member of the High Court. His daughter, Louise, was educated at the convent of the Sacred Heart and, provided with a small dowry, had married M. du Peyrouard, an incompletely ruined gentleman who vegetated in the lowest ranks of small administrative offices. The protection of the senator quickly made him an inspector general and he passed his life conscientiously watching the wasting of his budget in accordance with the best rules of administration, firmly convinced that he was rendering unheard-of services to the army and to agriculture.

His wife, hardly pretty but fresh and lively, was made for intrigue above all. She was very deep in the official world, which is, under any régime, the forefront of eternal greed, and was feared and loved there. She dropped her lines everywhere, was mixed

up in everything, opened the way to some and barred it to others, and would have it that her hand was felt by all. She knew the private history of everyone. She knew their needs, their appetites, their weaknesses; to some she was sympathetic, even a tempter if the need arose; but she was implacable when she found herself hampered in working out her plans. She was thirty-six, pious, body and soul in the charitable work of the Church, protecting religion against the heterodox, and storming—in the name of all those who had something to defend—against everything new. She did not love the Republic, but yielded to it under the persuasions of the old Senator.

The convent had been an all-powerful aid to Mme. du Peyrouard in her political career. She found, like the Comtesse de Fourchamps, that friendships made there were powerful levers, and neither of them wasted her opportunities. The two women were born to be friends. The moment they met there was engendered a passionate and permanent enthusiasm which never faltered or was betrayed. Mme. du Peyrouard carried her refinement to such an extent that she allowed an adventure or two to be imputed to her in order not to contrast too severely with her friend, and the comtesse, who was not deceived, was grateful to her for the consideration.

The ace in Mme. du Peyrouard's hand was her brother, Étienne, a young deputy with a great future.

Although he was the older by two years, she had helped him greatly with advice in the critical hour of his parliamentary beginnings. She remained his surest friend, his happiest inspiration, and the most resourceful of his aids.

Étienne was marvellously endowed with the faculties of memory and imitation and had rapidly acquired the habit of mind of "successful men." Under the lofty guidance of his father he had crowned this work with the trick of fluent speech. His aptitude for falling into the prescribed attitudes, his art of yielding to all who could serve him, his happy desire to please, and his studied application in order to merit the applause of serviceable mediocrities, made him the admired of all, even in his youth. He excelled in all small things and led a cotillon incomparably.

"Make sure of the women," Louise advised him again and again.

He did as he was told and, with patience, conquered widely. People said, "He will go far." Nothing is so potent as are these words to insure a man universal favour.

His father wanted him to begin modestly. One day, when the ministry needed his vote, he bargained for a *sous-préfecture* and the beginner left for Gascony, where, under the prudent eye of his mother, he could think about Tocqueville and Duvergier de Hauranne while "looking after" his work. He

"looked after" it so well that, at the end of four years, the deputy from that district found himself scandalously unpopular and there was no other possible candidate except Étienne Montperrier himself.

To say that Étienne Montperrier was a deputy is nothing. He was a deputy; the accredited dispenser of governmental favours, of multicoloured ribbons and lace; and, therefore, master of everything and of everybody—a feudal lord, and slave to his own tyranny. In the Chamber of Deputies he recited prettily some pieces that his father had composed for him and ended with some of his own eloquence. So-called independent journalists, looking into the future and pleased at the chance to travel in good company, wrote laudatory articles about him. They laughed at them in private but the world accepted the praise in good faith.

And so "the orator of youth" found himself chosen by all right-thinking people ever suspicious of extravagance of thought or of knowledge. The Comtesse de Fourchamps called him "the Bouguereau of the Tribune," in superlative praise. He had a fine presence; his elegance of dress, his deep blue eye, and pointed black beard, were said to cause havoc. He was almost mediocre in everything, but he bundled his inferior fagots and achieved a kind of superiority; he was good until his self-interest was involved, sincere until he had to act, and daring to the limit of audacity. He had the most enviable start of

any man; but it was the start of a useless thing, fruitless, but worthy of attention as a precious example of a collection of everything that was not true.

Such as he was, in the first rank of men looking for profitable opinions, Montperrier found the right road at his first trial and, without straying once from the narrow path, enrolled himself instinctively on the side of the strongest. However, he worked his success, and made conditions when a place in the Cabinet was mentioned. He knew that the important thing was to be "in with the Government." The rest would come. He decided that he must make a great marriage before he came into the open.

"To-day," he would say ingenuously. "I am the future. There is always a little loss in the present."

His sister discussed the matter with the comtesse who had undertaken to sell Montperrier for all he could fetch in the marriage market. Many projects were discussed and rejected one after the other, and Étienne never had the bad taste to disagree with his protectors.

A lively effort was made for Lucienne Préban. But the countess was very soon convinced that the girl had really given her heart to her moustached Smyranean. It was a shame to be stopped short by such a stupid obstacle. However, the comtesse decided that it would be even more stupid to insist, so, after a consultation with Baron Oppert, came to

the conclusion that Claudia and Montperrier would suit each other in every particular.

When the comtesse returned from Ste. Radegonde she had come to an understanding with Mme. du Peyrouard that the two young people should be given frequent occasions to meet each other. The encounter at Morgan's was not surprising. Étienne had come with his sister, and the comtesse was very happy to present the brilliant and grateful deputy to the Marquis de Puymaufroy.

After the usual compliments had been exchanged they returned to the marvels of India and Mme. du Peyrouard, assiduously attentive to Claudia, wanted to see everything and to handle everything. Montperrier devoted himself to winning the favour of Puymaufroy.

"I know, monsieur le marquis, that after fighting nobly for your faith and for your country, you have retired from the world to your estate in the midst of the farmers to whom you are devoting your life. That is an example of duty thoroughly done."

"I'm afraid you're far from the mark," answered Puymaufroy, who couldn't help smiling. "Have we got to the point where a man can boast of simply defending his country, as if there were something extraordinary in that?"

"Well spoken! Very few of us understand things that way. You belong to the time when people *did* things."

"Well, you can do things."

"Alas! All our good intentions seem paralyzed. We need some powerful spirit, some powerful will, to gather them and to make them act. Shall we find such a man?"

"Do it. We'll see!"

"My generation hasn't had its day yet. I hope it will come. But when? And how? What will be demanded of us? Under all governments certain conditions of order and progress remain. You defended them with the sword. We have only the pen and the spoken word to defend them from the greed down below——"

"From the greed up above."

"That's an aristocrat's joke. Don't you think it's right for the few to be given social advantages, as pay for the sacrifices that they make for the common good? That payment gives profit to everybody because it eventually comes back to the masses."

"And it isn't our fault, I suppose, that we are among the few? We have to be capable of devotion to speak as you do."

"I want to serve my country; that is my only ambition. France is easier to govern than people imagine. Our whole mistake is not to trust more to the good sense of the 'ignorant mass.' I dare to speak to them and they applaud me. People say you need courage to do that. That's exaggeration. All you need is confidence in the power of reason,

which is enough to put public spirit on its guard against radicals. We're letting them attack us without raising a hand. It's absurd. I defend myself, and if the occasion arises I hope to defend all of us."

"That's very fine. I like best your 'us'. It's clear that the possession of power has finally shown you that the interests of all of the few are identical. An end to generous illusions!

"That's the history of the leaders of the Third Estate and even of the nobility, after the beautiful dream of the Revolution. Even Montmorency and La Rochefoucauld would have to admit the danger of letting loose all sorts of mad hopes."

"Your ancestors are very fine, sir."

"Monsieur Montperrier," cried the comtesse, "I won't let monsieur le marquis deprive us of the pleasure of hearing your opinion about these magnificent things from India. Your taste is so good. Come, look at what can be done with a simple thread of silk, and tell us what you think."

"It all seems wonderful to me," said Montperrier, absently; and he turned to Deschars:

"You must have had a very wonderful voyage, monsieur. In England I once saw some admirable cloth that one of my friends, the Duke of Stamford, brought back from India. Later I was told that they were sent out to Delhi from Manchester and Macclesfield."

"You couldn't fool anybody in India," answered Maurice, quietly.

"I wouldn't be fooled," Claudia put in, hastily.

"We're thinking of organizing some *tableaux vivants* and I count on you, Monsieur Montperrier, to find us some subjects. M. Deschars, who holds India in his hand as you hold the budget commission, is going to reconstruct some historic scene in which we are to appear with peacocks and elephants and tigers. You can choose a part for yourself."

"Among the animals?"

"No. I see you as some sonorous divinity with a flaming head and arms all over, very long arms, as in politics."

"You flatter me much, mademoiselle. I should be content with the part of a slave, at your feet."

"You wouldn't do it at all well, I assure you."

"Has Morgan told you the story about Mélanie?" asked Mme. du Peyrouard, who thought that her brother was not showing to advantage.

"I should say so," answered the comtesse. "Claudia and I saw the prince's young victim pass, followed by the dragging footsteps known to all Paris. I must say the girl looked very fine. Quite simple and with the most natural air, neither proud nor ashamed of what she had done."

"And why should she look otherwise?" asked Montperrier. "It's destiny. She discovered it a little later than the others. Or perhaps she thought

she would do better by delaying. In that case you have to praise her business sagacity."

"I think you are hard," said Puymaufroy. "Look at these girls. They're chosen for their beauty. They're made to please, and they're far more seductive than many of the patrons. You dress them the richest way, and the choice of an hour for the patron represents a year's wages to the mannequin. You exhaust every resource to heighten the charm of their youth and beauty. You bring them in front of a mirror and make them pose, and even if they were angels they couldn't help noticing that the gowns fit them ravishingly. You handle them and turn them round and round as if they were automatic figures. And many a great lady who is irritated by their charm takes every chance to show her scorn for the 'inferior' creatures."

"Marquis, you are as moving as a preacher in his pulpit," broke in the comtesse, touched to the quick.

"And then," continued Puymaufroy, as if he had not heard, "the thing turns, it feels that it is a woman, and looks at the ugly, insolent creature. They say to themselves. 'If she, why not I?' Look where you will, there is no answer."

"There's the best answer in the world," replied Montperrier. "It is that things *are so*, and can't be otherwise."

"That's just the question, Mr. Politician. And if your ancestors, and mine, for that matter, hadn't

said "Things must be otherwise, many of us wouldn't be cutting so fine a figure now."

"Oh, well; let them rebel, then, as our fathers did."

"That is what they are doing, with the only weapons they have. Only it happens that now, as then, the masters brand the rebel in the name of their own superior morality."

"Really," said the comtesse, chilled by the marquis's sermons, "what's the use of discussing what the world might be like? It is what it is, as M. Montperrier so wisely said just now. It is a great argument. Can't we quietly enjoy what has been given to us without worrying ourselves with impious recriminations? They are impious because Providence, I think, has arranged everything for the best!"

"Morgan says that his mannequins have a mania for greatness," remarked Claudia. "I'm not surprised that they want to change places and I'm as sorry for them as you are, Uncle. But whatever the excuse, their shame contrasts with the virtue of others, even if virtue comes easy to us."

"Undoubtedly, my dear. I'm not offering you Mélanie as an example. However, if you could understand how much is meant when we say Us."

"But anyhow it's true that we are of one world; and these women, with or without their Princes de Luques, are of another. What have we in common?"

Much perhaps by birth; nothing by social necessity. Could things be better arranged? I have neither the time nor the means to find out. I go on."

"But at Ste. Radegonde——?"

"What can I do here?"

"I agree with Mlle. Harlé," said Montperrier, "that you have to choose between philosophizing and living."

"And in order to live, lose all interest in life," answered Puymaufray, quoting.

"I swear we're very emotional about Mélanie," said the countess. "Prince de Luques's pretty little mannequin would have a good laugh if she could hear us. Gentlemen, let us not go into the clouds. There's the Church for that, and we share its merits because we are the Church."

"So," replied Henri, "all the joys of earth and heaven are thrown into the bargain."

"We can hardly do with less," said the comtesse, proudly. "Can we, Claudia?"

"I hold fast to to-day and I want to get everything out of it," said Claudia. "It was one of the ancients that said that, too," she threw out at Henri.

"Beaten with your own weapons!" cried the comtesse.

"Apparently I am wrong, madame. It's wrong to try to put old thoughts into young heads. If I were Claudia's age I wouldn't worry about to-morrow."

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"Most nobly surrendered. I'm going to make Luques tell me the true story of Mélanie and you'll see there's no occasion for shedding tears. In the first place, it's useless; and then, remember, Claudia, that crying gives you wrinkles."

## CHAPTER IX.

**T**HE committee for the Old and Incurable met that evening at the home of the president, Mme. la Comtesse de Fourchamps. Abbé Nathaniel had time, after twenty charitable enterprises, to receive tattered men and women, old offenders in misery, at the gates of prisons and the doors of hovels. He nourished them with soup and holy words. By suitable sermons he brought them back to decency, that is to regret sincerely that they had ever strayed from the path on which they might have found tranquillity of body and peace of mind in the satisfaction of their diverse needs. After that they died, edified, and edifying, and made place for others.

For the Old and Incurable, and for two dozen other charities, the abbé begged and collected and gave with generous hands. Under his catholic faith the blood of Israel spoke marvellously. He bought lands and sold; made and unmade plans; constructed, built, speculated—always on the lookout for some bargain for his poor. He had the double virtue of attracting gold and coining it under his own eyes. Baron Oppert, whom ostentation made as generous as the poor, was not enough. The abbé's agricul-

tural colony in Algeria had been swept by locusts and was in need of help. The baron, when consulted, said that something must be arranged. With that recommendation Abbé Nathaniel betook himself to the comtesse.

"Charity sales are terribly overdone," she remarked. "We've got to freshen it up somehow, because it still is the best way to drag money out of reluctant givers. You see, abbé, you can't get people to climb the road to heaven unless you strew the path with some of the seductions of the Tempter."

"You know the weakness of the human heart, madame."

The comtesse made an untranslatable gesture which might have meant: "There's reason enough."

"Listen," she said. "You'll begin as usual by getting some of the surplus stock at the big stores."

"I've done that so often!"

"Do it again. You'll always get them. Mutual aid, you know. Think how much commerce gains from the propaganda of the Church."

"Oh, commerce is complaining now that we're a rival."

"And it's not so far from right. Yesterday at the Madeleine I got a little religious book in which I found an advertisement for the beer of the Trappist Fathers."

"The misfortune of this age. The profane and the holy should aid each other."

"That's exactly what you must say in the stores. And when you've made your collection, I will take care of the rest."

"Madame, you are my guardian angel on earth."

"Because I expect you to be mine in heaven, my dear abbé."

It was as result of this conversation that the committee was meeting, with Mme. du Peyrouard as vice-president and Claudia as secretary.

Harlé had come with his daughter and with Puymaufroy. Oppert and the abbé had both been summoned. The abbé reported that the goods for the sale were collected; the baron gave equally good news on the subject of booths and decorations. And while the ladies discussed the assignment of booths the men sat in an adjoining room and talked.

"It is certain," the abbé was saying, "that society is divinely organized. Just as we fail to appreciate the daily benefits of health, so we are not sufficiently grateful for the advantages we gain from the social order, in which the hand of the Infinite Goodness can be seen. Property, the security of person and goods, the guarantees of impartial justice, the liberty of what is good—made up for in this unhappy time, alas! by the license of things that are evil—the development of noble enterprises by the Church, these are really admirable features of a divine plan."

"There are shadows," murmured Puymaufroy.

"Undoubtedly. But that is where religion enters

to make everything right again. The trial of misery decreed by providence has for balance the marvels of charity."

"Look at the abbé's work," said Oppert. "Listen to these women worrying themselves in order to do good to others."

"I admit that there is beauty in the world, although I understand it another way," answered Puymaufray. "Only I am afraid to think what becomes of your humility when it sets out to compensate the evils decreed by Divine Goodness."

"What about the work in there?"

"Full of good intentions. I am the last one to discourage human pity which sometimes finds its way into our hearts. There are beautiful impulses in men of all ranks, from those most corrupted by poverty to those most corrupted by wealth. But in the immensity of evil how disproportionate is our aid to what we might give. I listen to these women because I'm urged to. And you can judge for yourself how well their sacrifices for charity go with their own pleasure."

"That's a good text for a sermon; it's easy to see that you served the Pope. You remind me of Father Anselm: 'Tremble, women of the world'——"

"Then they don't tremble at all. Just listen."

"We must excuse the infirmities of human nature. A good deed is a good deed, none the less."

"And besides, religion isn't the only thing. There's

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ourselves," Harlé proclaimed, emphatically. "Social authority. The strongest, who are the best. Everything that increases our power increases the happiness of the world, for as we grow more powerful we civilize, like conquerors."

"Yes, you do show some eagerness to conquer," said Henri.

"And that's best for everyone."

"You say so, at any rate."

"I prove it. You never have asked me about my great scheme, which I am now working on, together with the baron and the abbé. It's no longer a secret, because in a month we'll be before the public."

"I don't doubt that it will be well conceived and methodically executed."

"It's extraordinarily simple. I'm becoming a journalist."

"What?"

"You're astonished? Then follow my line of thought. I make paper. I get my sheets from Norway and Austria, which have the raw material and the water for motor power. Austria is a more industrial country and carries the process a step further. But both countries stop midway and I have to take up the work where they leave it. That's a loss of power and of time. But when I make my paper what do I do with it? I hand it over for other people to destroy its original whiteness with print. They sell it at a good price. My product is

their raw material just as Norway's product is mine. But why shouldn't I complete my work? Why let someone else blacken my sheets and get the profit? This writing industry is only recently organized—it's only beginning to walk. As usual, the beginning is anarchy. Someone must come to group all these attempts, to organize and coördinate the work, for the greatest possible result. So I've studied this curious business thoroughly—gone to the bottom of it. It's strange it should have been neglected until now by the great organizers, for, all things considered, it is the thing that makes humanity act. Certainly, Henri, you never have seen the commercial possibilities of thought."

"I don't even know what you mean by it."

"I'm not surprised. Listen a little longer. Writing isn't enough. You have to be read. Suppose you wrote the profoundest thing in the world; the secret of the universe, for example. Send it to the library. Who can read it? Not even the greatest minds. Or write the last word on science. Half a dozen academicians will be able to understand. That's better than the first attempt. But I'm afraid you'll find it won't pay enough."

"What are you driving at?"

"At this: the lower you come down, the more numerous your readers. You see, instead of trying to impose my opinions on others, like all the professional writers, I am going to give the product that

will please the greatest number. That's the method in industry. I don't make the kind of paper I choose, but the kind I can sell. And the economic law must hold for printed paper as well as for white paper. The largest clientèle—that's the masses—will always buy printed paper if it's suitable to their tastes."

"Yes. It has already been remarked that papers are edited by their readers."

"The man who said that was no fool. Come down with me into the crowd and you'll see that you must lower the quality of your thought in proportion as you get deeper into intellectual densities. Try to awaken a curiosity, but always feed it with suitable food. I'm not saying anything against the pictures at the Louvre. They are very fine things in their way. But what can the masses make of them? They pass by—indifferent—and run to a chromo bath scene."

"So, if I understand it, you're going to exploit the rubbish of thought."

"Not thought at all, as you use the word. Facts. Doctrine is the Church's business. People will turn to the catechism for the last word without my telling them. Perhaps you'll say that human vanity is so great that even the most ignorant must have ideas. There are, in fact, certain ancient ideas which those who have gone ahead call prejudices. Time has made them useful in the conduct of life. I will respect

them, I swear. I will give my readers ideas, accepted ideas; the ideas that have made the world what it is and must keep it so."

"Your work will be in vain. In spite of you, your writer will escape, and in the welter of stupidity you will find a word which will be the seed of the future."

"Writer? Who's that? I don't need a writer. I don't know that specimen of man. If there are visionaries who want to write books let those read 'em that like 'em. I need only schemes—and that's where I'm progressive."

"Decidedly you're right. It is the writing business, as you call it."

"Ah, you understand me at last. I'm leaving aside the relations between print and publicity in all sorts of affairs, good and bad. We progress in that line, too."

"You were trying to prove, a few moments ago, that your aggrandizement would be a benefit to everyone. And all you are showing me is one industry adding itself to another."

"I am not done yet. Selling my printed paper, which is made like every other piece of goods for the maximum market, is good. But the significance of what is written, of the facts disclosed and interpreted, the daily commentaries adapted to the rather low state of public sentiment, all this moves the changeable crowd, determines opinion, the sovereign of the day, not by violating its spirit, as presumptuous

radicals try to do, but by accommodating itself to the ancient habits of thought and by extracting from it all possible advantage."

"In other words, accepted ideas, fundamentally what we see every day, appear to you to be a better field of exploitation than the need for new ideas that make for better deeds."

"The question is higher than that, monsieur," interrupted the baron who was fidgeting in his chair. "The thing that struck me in Harlé's venture is that it is adequate in view of the actual principle by which men are governed. The problem is no longer how to affect the will of a monarch whose will carries the crowd. To-day we are bound to act upon the hydra-headed monster itself, by suggestions—not by ideas (that would be madness)—and by sentiments acceptable to the crowd. That seems risky, doesn't it? Well, it's simplicity itself, when once you realize that the great movements of public spirit are of short duration, while the common sentiments of all humanity—which are moderate and I would almost say mediocre—become the instruments for sure and durable things. The conservative is timid by nature and dares not attack the masses because he doesn't know what to say to them. He stupidly bemoans the spirit of his time and wastes himself trying to revive a dead past. The radical holds marvellous shining pictures before the eyes of the masses, draws them along with

him, and scatters ruin and confusion. Well, we will now go to the masses ourselves. We will generously come down to them. We shall be able to profit by the prime lesson of the Revolution, which made the mistake of making the greatest number the principle of action whereas the greatest number can only be an agent, because of the solidarity of permanent common interests—an agent of conservatism itself.”

“That’s a curious idea.”

“It is not an idea. It is the statement of a law of social mechanics. Universal suffrage, which people stupidly are afraid of, is the prime force of inertia. For twenty years our politicians have been awaiting movement, an impulse to move; look at the result. Action, in movement or thought, comes from the individual, from the man who is different from his fellowmen. The crowd is the resistance which he must overcome. The crowd is like the treetop—it lives by its roots. If you want to affect a whole forest at once you go to the roots. The great social merit of M. Harlé’s scheme is that he aims for the roots. That’s where Archimedes wanted to put his lever. Applied there, it can move the world.”

“And what about the branches and flowers and fruits? What about the liberty of the treetops, baron?”

“They used to chop off the particularly flourishing twigs when they grew too fast.”

## THE STRONGEST

"And you are afraid of the liberty of life?"

"Say of the savagery of life, marquis. Who knows the value of liberty more than I? It's a precious plant you've got to fertilize with gold—do not protest; with gold, I say—in order to kill license at the source. Always you must act at the root—Harlé's principle. Thinkers, as people say, are at liberty to write for a half dozen of their contemporaries. They have centuries in which to change the world. But we are men of to-day, we are. The liberty we need is the liberty of enlightened minds who are in the employ of the strongest and deduce from our acts a fitting philosophy. I assure you that that liberty will not suffer at our hands."

"And what about democratic government?"

"It's only a reduction of the crowd. The law does not change. If you want to move the crowd, look for these feelings which are common to all people, and if you want to enlarge your sphere of action, bring down the methods to the lowest level. That is a law of the world. That explains Harlé. When he wanted to extend an industry based on the expression of thought, the power of man over man, he was naturally led to the industrial formula of government itself."

"That's it," said Harlé. "The government of the strongest which always has been and always will be, under different names. I think it's something to industrialize the diffusion of thought, the sovereignty

of opinion, to make it bring in the greatest profit to the few and, through the few, to all."

"In short, you are reducing government to the condition of an industry in which you are the overseer."

"That's too simple a way of looking at it. Surely, the more you organize government on industrial lines the less waste of energy there will be, the less scattering of power. But what makes the factory easy for us is that we always have the upper hand over the men and no matter what happens we have the last word. The problem of government is harder because out of the confusion of the weak we have to formulate the will of the strong. Guizot himself thought that was impossible. I am going to prove practically how much you can get out of the masses if you enter into its spirit and speak its language. Let the politicians follow me and back me up if they want to, in order to take advantage of the crowd."

"In short, you are an overseer as I said."

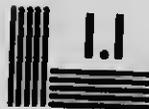
"If you're talking of vulgar profit, that's a trifling consideration with me. I consider it only as a just reward for the work of my intelligence, and I judge my success by it. But what is that in comparison with the benevolent glory of a master who leads his country, in peace and in war, to the destiny shaped by Providence?"

"That is all that our Pope requires," said the abbé.  
"He understands the needs of modern society and



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tries to speak directly to the masses, not to the feeble governments of a day, without courage and without authority. M. Harlé expressed it very well just now. Let those who need doctrine come to us, the guardians of the everlasting fountain."

"There's the demand for new things, which you're not counting on at all," said Puymaufroy.

"Man's pleasure is to change things," said Oppert.

"His necessity is to conserve. There is only one way to reconcile this contradiction. That is to put new names on the old things. The masses are satisfied with that."

"That's a good lesson in politics," said Puymaufroy.

"I won't argue about it. I marvel at it. I am only sorry that, according to your own confession, you are in a position to affect only the lowest feelings of humanity."

"You are misconstruing the sense of my words," said Harlé. "We are talking about the fundamental feelings, the feelings common to everybody, which are only lower in the metaphorical sense of the word, because everything else is based upon them."

"But you are not basing anything on them."

"Because the work is already done. The Church has said the first and last word of life. We have nothing to seek. We must preserve. You know the innovators always bring a confusion of contradictory propositions. The Church has unity, the

authority of eighteen centuries. It is Force. There is nothing else to say."

"Gentlemen," said the countess, coming in followed by the committee, "we shall soon be ready to open our bazaar in the house of Monsieur le baron Oppert. In order to give the affair a new twist we have decided to send out tickets, to a chosen few, for some *tableaux vivants* which will be presented in the home of M. Harlé. I hope, monsieur abbé, that the *tableaux vivants* will please you, because you will know in advance by what feelings they are prompted."

"Surely, madame. You can take scenes from the Bible or from the lives of the Saints."

"We thought of that. But the field has been pretty thoroughly gleaned. Couldn't we join the sacred and the profane?"

"Why not?" answered the abbé. "If you avoid anything shocking."

"That's the difficulty. In order to utilize his Indian things, M. Deschars has proposed to represent some scenes from the life of Buddha. Isn't he a false god?"

"Many pagans, notably the Chinese, worship him as divine. There are dangers in that."

"We need a lot of money, Father, and I must tell you that M. Deschars's *tableaux* would be the hit of the evening."

"You make me reconsider, madame. As a matter of fact this Buddha was a very modest and a very

good man who arrived on earth many centuries before Our Lord and nevertheless had some gleams of the future truth."

"A forerunner, then?"

"I wouldn't say that. Because he was plunged into an abyss of errors, in accordance with his time. Nonetheless, he was son of a king and preached renunciation of the world, austerity of life, poverty, and control of the appetites. He even set an example of these things."

"But that's very fine."

"Hasn't the Church preserved certain Indian ceremonies?" asked Puymaufroy.

"Just what I said; these people had their flashes."

"In that case we cannot offend religion by representing certain features of history in which the Church was not concerned," said the countess.

"Not at all, surely."

"You relieve me of a great doubt, my dear abbé. Now I can answer for our success."

"Well, Claudia, you are silent," said Puymaufroy.

"I'm sure you're thinking of the king's son who preached renouncing the world."

"At this moment, Uncle, I am wondering how we could make interesting tableaux out of such an excess of virtue."

"You aren't thinking of a vision of austerity."

"Well, you don't need cloth of gold for that."

"It is not forbidden," said the abbé, "to reconcile

moral beauty with art in order to edify some and console others."

"It's absolutely necessary," said the countess, "in order that the poor rich can win salvation at the same time as the happy poor."

"Then let's win salvation together," said Puy-maufray. "We'll always have the consolation of having enjoyed the good things of earth."

"Which are not to be sneered at," remarked Claudia. "M. Deschars ought to show us a sublimity which adapts itself to our weaknesses."

"Never mind, dear," the countess assured her, "we aren't going to dress you as a beggar girl. If you wish it we'll ask M. Montperrier to talk things over with the abbé and choose the subjects. M. Montperrier, who is very talented, excels in theatricals. If Mme. du Peyrouard asks him, he'll help us."

"If I ask him he'll find a hundred pretexts to squirm out. But a word from you, dear Countess, or from Mlle. Harlé, and he'll accept."

"Good. I'll ask him to come to-morrow."

## CHAPTER X

**W**HEN Mme. du Peyrouard and Montperrier arrived the next day they found Claudia already busy ordering flowers for the bazaar. The young politician was very zealous, but he mentioned some serious business which did not leave him free to dispose of his time. That was not all. He was being reproached for his worldliness. His enemies, his jealous friends, taxed him with being frivolous. He laughed at them. But those whom he led and who took it on themselves to arrange his life, complained that he was too contemptuous of stupid criticism. What wouldn't people say when they heard that he was organizing *tableaux vivants*? They always managed to get something mean to say against him. He was even reproached for going to salons which led to the Academy, as if he could be thinking of a candidacy already. He was undisturbed by this gossip, but politics made him pay dearly for his independence.

"I see, my dear girl, that you'll have to plead with M. Montperrier yourself," said the countess. "Otherwise I'm beaten."

"I couldn't take the responsibility," answered

Claudia. "After what we've just heard it would be cruel for us to enlist M. Montperrier in such a dangerous adventure."

"Your wishes would be enough, mademoiselle," said Montperrier, bowing. "Your mockery is more than enough. I am at your orders."

"Perhaps you will regret it."

"If my services please you, then I am paid in advance for my trouble."

Deschars came in at these words and was disagreeably struck by the tone of self-confidence in the trifling conversation.

"Here you are at last," cried the countess, "we've been waiting for you. I've already discovered that your Buddha isn't a false god, as I feared. Abbé Nathaniel was very literal. He has allowed us to represent scenes from the life of your prophet so long as they don't seem to interfere with the teachings of the Church."

"I wouldn't have thought of proposing such a thing, madame."

"The abbé, who knows everything, says that Buddha was son of a king and became a beggar or something like that."

"Quite, madame."

"We've been admiring that feature of it. You aren't afraid of making it a fad among the families that aspire to the presidency?"

"No; nor in any other families."

"That's what I think. So we'll take the chance. Now tell us the legend and above all don't dress Mlle. Harlé like a beggar. She seemed gravely worried about that yesterday and I had to reassure her. Don't you think, Claudia, that two scenes will be enough for India? Piety must dominate the tableaux. We owe that much to the sentiments that inspire our work."

"I think two tableaux will be enough. The religious scenes will be simpler to do."

"But, mademoiselle," said Montperrier, "suppose I ask you to put on the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon?"

"Oh, that's a lovely idea," cried Claudia. "We can show the splendours of the Orient in it, too."

"Decidedly, Monsieur Montperrier, you are indispensable," said the countess. "I'm sure you'll do us a marvellous setting. All right now, Monsieur Deschars, we're waiting for Buddha."

"Certainly. I will give you only two scenes, as you wish. The departure of the prince, when he leaves the royal palace to preach renunciation of the world; and then the scene of his temptation under the Tree of Knowledge."

"Explain that."

"Oh, I don't want to give you a lecture and we needn't conform strictly to the legend. The prince, Siddhartha, never went out of the palace of the King Kapilavastu, his father. . . ."

"Do you insist upon those names?"

"Oh, no! They aren't important because there are no words in the tableau."

"Well, perhaps we can have a footnote on the programme; but that will discourage people."

"Then perhaps we'd better not have a footnote."

"Well, if those names are examples, perhaps not. All the same, tell us the story."

"Well, the books say that when he left the palace in his carriage he met in succession an old man in the last stages of exhaustion, a sick man, and a dead man."

"Heavens!" cried Claudia. "You're not going to show that!"

"No, mademoiselle. Please, let me finish. Later, a religious mendicant came up. . . ."

"What, were there mendicant orders in those days?" asked the countess.

"Yes, madame."

"Good. I see the story. The prince wanted to enter the order. I told the abbé. He is a forerunner."

"You have guessed it, madame. He conceives the idea of teaching people to overcome weakness, illness, death, all the miseries of mankind."

"By contemplating eternal things. I know the rest. He sinks himself in God. It's admirable. Only your story isn't new. There's the story of St. Francis of Assisi."

"Two thousand years later."

"What's the difference to us?"

"Yes, but," said Claudia, "if we do St. Francis of Assisi, where do these Indian things come in?"

"That settles it, dear child. Let's get on with Buddha. I see the tableau. The prince is in his carriage. The whole court is at the walls. The women are lamenting, and show their regret—with appropriate gestures. The old man and the sick man and the beggar give the effect of contrast. Nothing could be more moral. Your tableau can pass. And the other?"

"The other is quite simple. It is the temptation under the Tree of Knowledge."

"You're sure it isn't a parody of our sacred Book?"

"Absolutely."

"There's no serpent?"

"No, no! Buddha is tempted by the daughters of the demon Papiyan."

"And what do these young women do?"

"They express—by their poses."

"Oh, yes. Very good. I hope the prince resists."

"If he didn't, madame, I wouldn't speak of him to you."

"The second picture can be utterly charming, and it teaches absolutely exemplary morals. All the advantages combined. My compliments. It won't be better than the Queen of Sheba because you can't get ahead of M. Montperrier. But it will be very

good. Now, gentlemen, you must bring us some sketches in about three days and we'll go over them. Then we'll choose our artists and we'll go on to the serious question of the costumes while you get the scenery."

"That's decided, then," said Montperrier. "I'll see Wilfrid Leigh. They say his religious paintings are too modern. So he'll suit us exactly. Our Queen of Sheba must be of the world."

"And I'll go into the Guimet Museum and consult some portfolios."

"I beg you not to be too exact. We must have fantasy. Your India must be suitable to the taste of Paris, sir."

Deschars admired the skill of the countess in putting him in an unfavourable light while seeming to be perfectly friendly. He felt the effects she created, but was helpless. Vexed and awkward, he let himself be monopolized by his beautiful enemy while Montperrier developed his ideas to Claudia and conferred with her on the disposition of cloths or flowers, discussed the Queen of Sheba tableau, and suggested the representation of the "Marriage Cana" after Veronese.

"I'm a fool," thought Deschars. He was simply in love—too sincerely affected to be able to play a game. Montperrier's rushing shocked him the more because it seemed to please Claudia. The Comtesse de Fourchamps cruelly dealt him the final blow.

"Claudia, dearest child," she cried, "you mustn't monopolize M. Montperrier. We all need to hear his opinions, and I can see by M. Deschars's eyes that he wants to ask him some questions."

(Montperrier excused himself with graceful impertinence. But in that moment Deschars saw the enterprise revealed. Montperrier was a suitor for Claudia's hand, and the countess was conducting the intrigue. The unhappy man trembled. Before his eyes, under the mocking insult of smiling lips, passed the vision of complete catastrophe: the triumph of the world over a love that had only truth on its side. He saw Claudia hesitating at the cross-roads and was terror-stricken by the irresistible force of his enemies. Yet he loved—and, therefore wished to believe. He put spurs to his sorrow and joined battle at once.)

"Oh, yes. I need your priceless advice to make India fashionable in Paris."

"Oh, it isn't much. I'd need you much more at Delhi. We're all Parisians here."

"If I dared, I'd say you were right. Paris isn't very great when you come from the wide world."

"We lack the gilded banks of the Ganges, and the burning skies, and the dancing girls in the moonlight," said the countess; "but still, I thought Paris still held its place."

"We can say that proudly, madame, and still regret that the Parisian obstinately insists on thinking himself the centre of the universe."

"I didn't know you had such small prejudices. How do you like the compliment, Claudia?"

"You have a terrible way of putting things, madame. I was talking of the Parisian who never leaves Paris. Mlle. Harlé has just come from the country where she has seen people quite different from society in the Bois."

"Paris on trial before a jury of thinkers," said Montperrier, scornfully. "Will you tell me why every thinking man looks toward Paris, and expects something from Paris?"

"That isn't so true as it used to be unfortunately," parried Deschars. "Besides, I don't think we're talking about the same Paris."

"In the eighteenth century, Paris—social Paris—held the eyes of the civilized world."

"There are times when the eighteenth century seems very far off."

"That's because we're at the end of the nineteenth, Monsieur Deschars," argued Claudia. "That changes much. I come from the country, it's true, and things weren't bad down there. But I like it up here and I can't believe that there's anything anywhere finer than life in Paris; of course I'm speaking of the Paris that I know. When I am old and incapable of pleasure, I'll meditate on the vanity of things here below. While I await that day I am going to follow my uncle's last words of advice: give myself up to youth!"

"And you are right!" muttered Deschars. "The trouble with Paris now is that even its young people are old, tired out; they can't think or act. The young; they're those that have generous impulses in their hearts—who believe, who have a great purpose in life—who fight against the disillusion of the world, and refuse to surrender even when they are beaten. Our ill-natured youth with its mean plans, its shrivelled ambitions, mortified with its desire to mislead, is really old. What can it know of the joy of living, since it knows only a pitiable life of falsehood?"

"Come, come, Monsieur Deschars," retorted the countess, "what has our youth done to you? Perhaps you are right? M. Montperrier, who is engaged in active life, sometimes says nearly the same thing. Let us begin by setting a good example. Let us get to work—on our tableaux."

Deschars was in a hurry to see Puymaufroy and tell him of his discovery: the open pretensions of Montperrier and the too-obvious complicity of the countess. Montperrier made it a point to leave before his rival, but his sister, who had kept in the background, stayed to cover his retreat. But Claudia was no longer expansive. She suddenly became silent, thoughtful, uneasy, and discontent. Mme. Marie-Thérèse could not get a word from her on the way home in the coupé.

Why should Deschars's lofty disinterestedness

seem less bearable to the young girl for exposing Montperrier's pretensions in all their pettiness? What could the lonely virtue of truth do in a torn soul against all the powers of the world? Deschars stood out against the world, but where would his prowess bring him? He could not impose himself on the world by force of genius, and men of lofty ideas were all too often honoured only after they were dead, crushed in the embrace of the strongest. There was a hidden grandeur. Perhaps it was the most beautiful, the most worthy of admiration—on the part of a philosopher contemptuous of the world. But that was too much of the sublime for a young heart tempted by immediate joys. Montperrier, mediocre though he was, was gifted; he had address, elegance, and the advantage of being in the service of the master powers of the world. Undoubtedly he could be considered as a dupe, a little fellow on great parliamentary stilts. What was the difference? A superior trick could make his power real by means of a marriage of money.

So spoke the Pannetier blood, which, by a mysterious law, Henri might have transmitted without ever being tainted with it himself. Pannetier or Puymafray? The last of both races had recognized their kinship in the sale of body and soul, where each one brought his share of greed to the endowment of the succeeding generation. Were the sins of the fathers to descend upon the innocent child?

Or would the daughter of Claire Mornand find herself, as her mother before her, in full resistance against the social domination of the strongest?

Two powers disputed possession of her soul: Dominic Harlé, an example of active happiness, and Henri de Puymaufroy, thoughtful and morose—all love, while the other was prodigal with pleasures. The heights tempted Claudia, but on her first flight the attraction of the world smashed her young wings and brought her down. She found a happy refuge in the heart of her godfather. She would have surrendered long ago without his warm words of unwearying tenderness. Which one really loved her? Which one had received the charge of watching over her from her dying mother? Who was it whom neither rebuffs from Harlé nor her own frivolity could discourage? Apart from her own failure Claudia saw the pain she might cause her godfather. No, she would not fail. She would not be taken in by the seductions of the world. It seemed brilliant, but it must be bad, since her godfather held it so. She would not be beaten. "I will not, *I will not!*" she said to herself. And at the bottom of her heart a voice answered, "Can you resist?"

While Mme. du Peyrouard and the countess discussed their plan of campaign, Maurice Deschars sought out Puymaufroy and told him the news in one brief exclamation:

"Montperrier wants to marry Claudia. The countess is on his side. We are lost!"

At first Henri would not admit "lost"—in any way.

"You must have expected that Claudia's hand wouldn't be yours without a struggle," he said. "I've heard of many rivals already. Given time, they'll hear of the bargain from New York to San Francisco. Fortunately Dominic despises the idea of restoring the fortunes of a ruined clubman. He hasn't worked in order to pay off some prodigal's debts, and he is beginning to think that he may as well be an ancestor himself. Claudia is guarded on every side. Montperrier has on his side his political advancement and the help of the countess. We should have foreseen that. However, I trust to Claudia, who will be able to read Montperrier's soul like a book. Trust her more. Trust yourself more. I told you that before. I can't head her off from Montperrier or from anybody. You must make her love you."

"Oh! If it were enough to love her and to tell her!"

"It is enough to love, if you love with the energy of a man that is confident of victory, and if you put everything into your love."

"And you? Have you ever loved that way? Tell me!"

"Yes—when I loved badly. When the true love came, my will was captive, with all the rest of me."

"Well?"

"Well, I can't tell you what to do. Now you want me to say that I'm here to help? You know I am!"

"Yes. I wanted you to tell me."

Meanwhile, the Comtesse de Fourchamps thought deeply. Her friendship for Mme. du Peyrouard and her brother could not be in doubt. She was ready to help them with all her power. But her help must accord with her own circumstances. Long ago, in an hour of weariness, she had had a discreet friendship with M. Montperrier, at the beginning of his career. He had the art of not remembering, grateful in anticipation of the service that was still to come. She was settling her account with him by the excellent marriage which she knew she would one day arrange for him. But what difference was it to Montperrier whether the girl was Claudia or someone else? What she had to know was what she, herself—Mme. de Fourchamps—wanted for herself. Puymafray attracted her by his disdain for all conventional triumphs; Harlé, by his power of action. She would dominate Harlé, but Puymafray would be her master. It was a great risk for a woman who had never surrendered herself. What did she know of him? Hadn't all her feminine art fallen before his unshaken reserve? Under his tranquil cordiality how invincibly did he resist everything that attracts men and draws them on? Not that he had given up the world entirely! A light

in his eyes, a trembling of his voice, at times showed the hidden flame of some mysterious passion. All she had gained for her efforts to enter into his mind was the irritation of knowing that it was always shut to her. Of what use were her tenderness, her anger, her hate—which hurt her so much that she herself had asked whether it was not love? Nothing; of no use! She had won nothing. In Poitou and in Paris, where she had hoped to draw him toward her, he had remained the same; sweetly impenetrable. Against what was she fighting? How could she fathom him? Even her indifference had failed against his inscrutable absorption with an inner life. And now it was clear that she could never penetrate his armour without the help of something unforeseen, without the decisive shock of some surprise. Harlé did not mind waiting and was satisfied with engaging smiles. He had decided not to come to terms until his new enterprise was in the full stream of success. On his side she could gain time. But the rivalry of Deschars and Montperrier was certain to precipitate events. If she upheld the claims of Montperrier she would alienate forever the good graces of Puymaufray. Let Montperrier be hanged, if only Puymaufray would—

The countess had come to that point in her reflections when Baron Oppert was announced. Besides his other virtues, the baron was a psychologist. Last night he had been struck with the countess's

insistent questions about Puymaufray in a brief talk they had had. He had a presentiment of "weakness" unworthy such a beautiful hand at the game. The idea of a disqualified man like Puymaufray being admitted to rivalry with Harlé seemed to Oppert the height of absurdity. Besides, Mme. du Peyrouard had given him, in confidence, an account of Montperrier's intentions, he had promised his support, as he had agreed with her in advance. He saw in the scheme advantages for Harlé—in whose favour the Abbé Nathaniel had gone to Rome with a plea for a title—and for Montperrier. Oppert was already building on what he deemed tantamount to the accomplished fact. Why should the caprices of a woman break up a combination so simple and so wise? He felt it his duty to the countess to find out what dreams were disturbing her usually clear and logical mind.

After gallantly kissing her hand the baron buried himself in a cushion and began:

"I have noticed, dear lady, that you very seldom talk for the pleasure of talking. And so, when I left you last night, I thought over your preoccupation with the Marquis de Puymaufray and wondered whether the prospects of our friend Montperrier weren't being imperilled by him."

"To tell the truth, I'm afraid they are, my dear baron. I can't give you details. M. Deschars is making a stiff fight and the marquis isn't the man to

be indifferent to his godchild's marriage. He will support his candidate all the more heartily since he seems to dislike M. Montperrier. He has influence over Harlé. I have often wondered what can bring together two men so utterly different."

"I've sometimes asked Harlé about his friend with whom he's always quarrelling. He doesn't speak ill of him."

"That's because he isn't afraid of him. Do you know anything about Mme. Harlé?"

"I thought of that. She was a sick woman . . . Fits of black madness. Didn't you hear about it down there?"

"Hardly. To love a man like Puymaufroy, Harlé must feel himself bound by something; a great service done to him—or perhaps a great service done *by* him."

"Am I mistaken? It seems to me he's courting you."

"Who? Harlé?"

"I wouldn't need to ask. I'm talking about Puymaufroy."

"What could have put that idea into your head?"

"I don't know. I thought so. He has a certain grandeur. You might find him very attractive."

"I might; but I don't. Besides, if you want my opinion, I think he's devoted to Claudia alone."

"These hermits are a desperate sort of creature. When they have done their duty, which is to ruin

themselves for the profit of those that work for their living, you never can tell what they are going to do with their uselessness. This one has become sentimental and is falling to pieces over it. It's incurable. Even you couldn't do anything. Harlé is a different kind. He has ideas and an intensity that I really admire. We can get along together. I suppose we remain faithful to Montperrier, don't we?"

"I think so. Always."

"You are right. The affair is equally advantageous to the captain of industry and to the politician. I say nothing of the little doll. Under our direction, this union of forces, skillfully employed, can produce a great power. I sometimes dream that you will add another item to the kingdom of beauty and wit."

"If the world weren't upside down, baron, you would be master of France."

"Perhaps I am more a master than many a crowned head, madame."

The countess understood her friend thoroughly and was grateful to him for the advice he gave. But she had decided to bring her uncertainties to light and not to take sides until she was sure of her ground. The baron saw everything financially, but there was something else. In order to decide she had to probe Puymafray and, without waiting for deeper causes, to find out how far he would yield and how far he would refuse. The hour for diplomacy had passed. With an enemy that was always on the defensive

it was necessary to risk everything on a frontal attack.

She saw him regularly at Harlé's. She asked him to come to see her, and talked about himself, about Claudia, about anything that might provoke him to confidences. But all the confidences he gave her were either commonplace or false. Sometimes she would break into a eulogy of Montperrier; then, her anger gone, she would calm him by making him understand that she would sacrifice all her friendships in order to please him.

The better Henri knew the countess, the more he feared her. He saw that Harlé was living from day to day with his eyes fixed on hers. He knew that her graciously implacable will held fast the man on whom supreme happiness or unhappiness depended. He was far from detaching Claudia; every day he saw the bond grow stronger between the girl he loved and the woman who must steal his love from him. Yes, Claire's daughter, of the purest and noblest blood, was yielding to the attraction of a corrupted soul which tempted her with the vanity of ruling over the despicable world.

Alas! He was again wearying Claudia with his eternal remonstrances. But what other part could he play? The better part of his advantage in the country was being wasted, lost, just when the danger grew most acute. Undoubtedly there was Deschars; but Deschars was afraid, and sensing danger on

every side asked for help instead of giving it. Only Prince Charming could rescue the child! A simple and direct man, of noble mind and a tender heart, at war with himself and paralyzed by love, fought at a singular disadvantage in this perplexing world where everything was against him. Montperrier, figuring everything out, could let himself be carried along, because he served both the high and the low interests of the strongest. Claudia herself remained the best chance. But genius was needed for her deliverance, while Puymaufroy and Deschars had only love.

Sheltered behind her perennial smile the countess was watching her prey. The hour would soon come when she would feel it trembling under her pink claws. A passing quarrel between Claudia and Henri gave her the occasion she sought.

Yielding to irresistible example Claudia had returned to her cosmetics, and Puymaufroy was vexed to see her obstinately ignoring all his prayers.

"What pleasure can you find in it?" he asked. "It's a lie which hasn't even the excuse of deceiving any one."

"Papa says I look very well this way. And besides, it's amusing. When everybody agrees to lie it's just the same as if everybody were telling the truth, because nobody is deceived. When I tell a bore I'm glad to see him, I'm lying, too. What's the difference? I get paid in the same coin and the

world is much more agreeable than if I were to say: 'You bore me,' or if any one said that to me."

"Alas! You are lying to yourself, my dear child, and that's worse. You are false to your youth, your simplicity, your grace, your truthful charm. The vain struggle against age is not so glorious. But what madness to disfigure your beauty in this idolatrous cult of yourself which is the worst of all perversions."

"Oh! So you think I am perverse, Uncle dear? What about the eighteenth century that you admire so much? What about the rouge and patches and powder and paniers and a lot of other things that weren't exactly in the best of taste and which I don't have to use?"

"These aren't the things for which I love that century. And the end showed that it had in it the germs of violent dissolution."

"Let me hope that a little white or pink cream for chapped hands won't have such terrible consequences. Come, let me see you smile."

"No. I don't feel like smiling. Because you've painted your little face you can kiss me only with the tip of your lips. And I can't give you a hearty embrace. I dare you to fling your arms round my neck." Then, after a pause: "You see?—you haven't even budged."

"Because you're making me angry."

"The truth has wounded you, my poor child. I thought you loved me enough——"

A shake of the head, a gesture of impatience, cut short these conversations. Henri was too often compelled to make advances for a reconciliation. The child did not yield.

One day when his patience was exhausted he announced that he no longer recognized his Claudia and would wait until he could find her again. This time there was a real quarrel and the Comtesse de Fourchamps, seeing Henri helpless, thought that the time had come to unmask her batteries.

The moment he came she opened fire bravely:

"I am desolate to see you so unhappy under your forced gaiety, my dear marquis. My friendship is very clairvoyant and I easily guess what you don't tell me. If you are displeased by my indiscretion, I will stop. However, I would be really glad to contribute, if I could, to easing your troubles. Perhaps you have always thought I was your enemy—at bottom. I mean: disposed to oppose your ideas about the happiness of those who are dear to you. I want you to think better of me. That's the reason I am taking the trouble of speaking to you openly."

Henri heard her out, silent with amazement at seeing all the reserve and prudence end in this outbreak of confidence.

"But I am not unhappy, dear madame, I assure you," he said with an effort.

"Ah! You oughtn't to answer that way to my offer of friendship—the most honest and most dis-

interested, I swear. Well, then, I must stop there, since you wish it. I shall be sorry, because it seems to me I could have helped you."

"But I beg you to speak, madame," said Henri, disconcerted by a vague ray of hope in the darkness.

"It's different if you demand it. Come, surely you don't believe I was the only one who didn't see your immense affection for your exquisite little niece. You saw her born, her father is your most intimate friend, her mother asked you to watch over her when she was dying. You promised. Claudia is the only love and the sole thought of one who has paid, I fear, for an excess of wild life by an excess of solitude."

"You have put it very well. You are not the only one that knows."

"Well. I can only draw one conclusion from this story, which is altogether to your advantage; and I am not afraid of a denial."

"Yes?"

"In one word. The supreme trial has come. The marriage day is at hand. It's the greatest risk a woman can run. We have only a choice of miseries; jealous tyranny or the insult of indifference; uncertainty, polite or brutal desertion; disillusion; weariness with a chain which we must drag along; despair; hatred; and for the climax, the temptation of a secret revenge. That is the destiny to which the banal words of the priest too often open the doors for us."

"There is also love," said Puymaufroy with a smile.

"Yes. That's the bait with which we are caught. However, none of us know what we are doing on the day we marry. It's a mad party played by the blind, with unhappiness as the stake. You speak of happy chances. You know how rare they are and that is what makes you so bitterly anxious for the child you love. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"At last we are agreed. Of course I guessed your feelings. What follows is inevitable. M. Harlé is an excellent man, but he is absorbed in his business, and he is satisfied if his child, whom he adores, is enjoying the present. She—well, she gathers roses while she may. That's what we all did at her age. And you're afraid of boring her with your sermons, although she loves you tenderly. Didn't it ever occur to you that it would be a good idea to call in the aid of a friend?"

Puymaufroy made a gesture void of definite meaning.

"You remember that it was I who asked you to come to Paris. I know you would have come of your own accord because Harlé's situation inevitably sacrifices his daughter to the calculations of our sad world. You couldn't have allowed her to face such risks while you were away. At any rate, I gave you the necessary pretext for coming. Would I have done that had I been opposed to you?"

"I never thought you were."

"I would like to believe that. Be that as it may I have spoken too frankly to stop now. I must go on to the end. The candidates are showing themselves. How often have I been asked to drop a favourable word! You'll guess without my telling you. I love the child too well, and even before I knew you I had too much respect for those who had rights over her. In such a serious business I would not risk a thoughtless word. However, Claudia is fully conscious of her awakening ambitions, most of which, to tell the truth, are not of the noblest. Just exactly what is she thinking, and what is she feeling? She can't tell us freely because it's too much trouble to be clear to herself. Like you, I am figuring on her natural goodness. But what does she know about life?—and how could she tell truth from falsehood? She has a fortune and she is beautiful. What can tempt her? Social position? Perhaps; or the satisfaction of a personal sentiment . . . and you can figure the chances from your own remark: "There is also love'."

"All this is very well thought out, madame. But what can we do?"

"Very little, to tell the truth. But who knows? Perhaps this very little can swing the balance. If it comes at the critical moment of which a woman is the best judge—a word may be decisive."

"Dear lady," said Henri who knew his danger all

too well, "you are showing that you are a true friend of my little girl. I am grateful to you for wanting to guide Claudia with your advice. Perhaps the event you speak of is not so close as you think——"

"My dear marquis, you are losing all your skill at diplomacy. I never speak inopportunistly. And since you appreciate my frankness, I will go on, to gain merit in your eyes. The nobility of your feeling has inspired in me the most lively sympathy from the first day, and let me add, the sincerest affection. You know me very little indeed if you judge me by the foolish gossip of Paris. I am a very honest woman, and when I give my hand I do not go back on it."

She held out her hand, wide open, a hand too long, too white, worked over, composed like a work of art, sparkling with jewels (unknown to her ancestors, and suggesting anything but honesty). Henri started to kiss it.

"No, no," said the countess, turning her palm upward. "We must first shake hands on the strength of it. Afterward, we shall see. Do we shake?"

"Shake," said Puymafray—with more courtesy than enthusiasm.

"Good. I am done with my speech. We are friends, sworn friends. You can count on me. Together we shall be able to defend Claudia. Our alliance gives me a precious duty. And who knows? Later—when you get to know me better; when you learn how much I, the woman of the world, am de-

tached from the world; and when you see how I can repay your confidence with the absolute loyalty of my heart——”

She had lowered her eyes to accentuate the equivocation. When she raised them again she could not suppress a movement of terror at the sight of Puy-maufray who had just begun to understand. At last the light had come! What then? Was it to this that the miserable creature was leading him? Marriage the price of Claudia's safety! She dared to propose it to him in cold blood. To give himself up as ransom for Claire's child? Not himself alone, but Claire with him—Claire herself, living in him, outraged, soiled by the odious contact. He had heard the infamous words, and yet he was there! He had not flung his contempt in her face!

A woman is between us, thought the countess, trembling with rage. “A woman who hates me.” Then, controlling herself with admirable poise she went on:

“Yes, my dear marquis, later—when you know me better, when you have put me to the test, when you are able to judge how much energy I can put into your service—you will remember, gratefully I hope, our conversation of to-day.”

“I shall not need to wait until then, madame,” answered Puymaufroy with a breaking voice. “Your affection for my godchild is a guarantee that you wish for her happiness, and I dared to hope, even before, that a little of this friendship would be ex-

tended to me. You have assured me of it. I give you all my gratitude. I assure you that it is not lost on me!"

"I am sure of it."

But when she was alone she asked herself:

"Then who is between us? I must have become pretty stupid to let myself be mocked by this pitiable dreamer. After all, what's the difference? I offered peace. He chose war. He shall have war—to the knife."

And Puymaufray, mad with rage, knew too well with what renewed ardour his enemies would press upon him. He felt a savage fury rise in him against all who stood between him and Claudia, and swore that he would spare nothing, even if he had to give his life for the child.

## CHAPTER XI

**U**NDER the direction of Étienne Montperrier—aided by Deschars, by the painter, Wilfrid Leigh, and the amateur artist, Alphonse de Valvois—the *tableaux vivants* were hastily organized. There was some difficulty about assigning the parts. Wilfrid Leigh had created a Queen of Sheba that was very Parisian, and the rough sketch was loudly acclaimed. It was universally recognized that the Comtesse de Fourchamps was the only woman who had sufficient authority to create the part. Montperrier easily persuaded her to take it, and, when his sister asked for the part of a lady in waiting whose simplicity would enhance the splendour of the Oriental queen, he yielded cheerfully. For the rest, Montperrier diplomatically solved the problem of rôles by agreeing to every request. They needed a Solomon and the Comtesse de Fourchamps proposed the Prince de Luques.

“With a curly wig, a black beard, a crown, and sceptre, the prince will give us a perfect picture of royalty,” she said.

The prince needed all these trappings because his long, shaking body, his patchy skull, his small, meanly

vicious eyes would more naturally recall Scaramouche in his grave than Solomon in all his glory. However, it was agreed that the idea was admirable and that the prince would cause a sensation.

"M. Montperrier," continued the countess, "it is up to you to make the prince accept." She did not tell him that she had already arranged the matter with De Luques.

In contrast with Montperrier, Deschars succeeded in pleasing nobody. It must be said that the countess led the opposition.

While Deschars was briefly explaining the legend, and trying groupings on the ramparts of the castle, the countess interrupted with:

"Tell me, Monsieur Deschars, about your prince who became a monk. Did he change the world as he set out to?"

"Yes, madame. He converted the hearts of many hundred millions of men. Or rather he brought into action their natural goodness which had been suppressed under a weight of selfishness."

"What is that in comparison with Him who gave His blood to save all mankind?"

"In his hatred of suffering, Buddha's pity went as far as the beasts. He offered his body to the tigress, so that the cubs might not be hungry."

"He was mad."

"Yes; as are all of us who go beyond the usual limits."

"Do you know that you are talking like a pagan? In other times you'd be burned alive. To-day your immorality will close the doors of society upon you."

"I didn't think I was being immoral, and from what I've seen I shouldn't say that the world was so strict."

"We don't kill newborn babes, like the Chinese."

"Strange. I heard the opposite in the criminal court the other day."

"We aren't polygamists."

"I should hardly have guessed that from seeing the walking harems along the boulevards."

"We are charitable."

"The rich are hardly drained by their charity."

"And what are we doing now, I ask you? Is this the time to scandalize us with your impiety? It's a charitable fête. We answer you simply by helping others and by making you do the same. Don't you see that Mlle. Harlé is waiting for you to tell her about your dirty Buddha—on whom I'd close my doors if it weren't for the dancing girls."

"You will bear witness, mademoiselle, that all I'm trying to do is to make the court pleasing to you."

"Yes," answered Claudia, "that is the most important part, and we're nearly agreed on it. Lucienne Préban tells me she'll accept the part of Buddha. She'll be in to-morrow. You'll get the instructions ready for her, won't you? As for me, I must be Gopa, the wife of the Prince. What about her?"

"She was the most beautiful of women, and by a miracle, the best of women, too."

"You mean that the combination hasn't been seen since?"

"On the contrary, I note the coincidence."

"Splendid. And what does Gopa need?"

"According to the story, her father-in-law gave her 'two pieces of white cloth strewn with precious stones, a collar of pearls, and a golden garland encrusted with real pearls.'"

"Oh, what a costume! The countess will lend me her pearls. And what did the Prince give her?"

"A robe with sheets of gold."

"Is that all?"

"I'm not sure. The rarest of his gifts was undoubtedly the spectacle of his supreme wisdom."

"Which he proved by leaving her to beg along the roads."

"That prince is certainly not a good example," put in Mme. du Peyrouard.

"My dear Deschars," criticized Montperrier. "Your designs, which are charming, have one fault. You have the Prince down stage with the crowd as the background. I suggest that you give more importance to the Court. The Prince is such a model of virtue that he ought to be modest, too. We'll run the chariot down to the entrance of the stage as not to be embarrassed by the horses. The driver is waiting for the signal to go. The Prince turns

for the final gesture of farewell to his wife. The whole audience will follow his look."

"Really, it will be better that way" said Claudia.

"Oh, it isn't what an artist would suggest," said Montperrier, modestly. "But when the actors and the spectators are society folk you have to consult the convenience of the eye."

"How do you manage to think of everything?" asked the countess.

"As for the Temptation, your sketch is perfect," continued Montperrier, who wanted to make a show of being generous. "Only Buddha, seen in profile, must be dressed all in gold under his palm tree. Of course gold isn't in the book, but the effect will be better. I suppose Mlle. Lucienne Préban will play Buddha straight through. All gold, but very simple, and with a lotus flower in her hand. For the rest, an orgy of dancing girls with flowers, Mlle. Harlé in the foreground. We'll develop the figures as we go along."

The countess and Mme. du Peyrouard were deciding whom to invite, discussing the latest indecencies of the stage and the newest follies of society, when Claudia came up to them.

"I suppose we shall have to invite Joseph Carlsberg," she said.

"I should think so," answered the countess. "He'll give us all sorts of notices in the press. Besides, he's a protégé of the baron."

"He's not any too decorative."

"What's the difference? He's a fine worker in a good cause."

"Mlle. Claudia, we need you for the Temptation scene," cried Montperrier.

Claudia ran off and presently they heard a grave discussion on the poses of the dancing girls.

"We must be careful not to have Carlsberg against us," said the countess.

"I should say so. He's one of the most powerful people."

"Yes. We mustn't lose sight of him. Why, look here, you're only allowing ten cards to Mme. de Plomeur. If she brings her whole court——"

"All her friends have remained faithful to her. That's the finest thing you can say for a woman of sixty."

"Do you remember the amusing trick that monster Beauval played on her?"

"What was it?"

"Well, he undertook to persuade her that he had had the honour of being one of her passions long ago. His memory seemed frightfully precise."

"Oh, yes. And then—after she had denied and denied—she ended by saying: 'Well, if you're sure——'"

"Napoleon didn't remember the names of all his battles. But he was an emperor all the same, just as Mme. de Plomeur was the glory of Paris."

"We mustn't forget Mme. de Brion."

A discussion in the next room cut short the conversation. The temptresses of Buddha all wanted first honours. Montperrier suggested that Claudia be alone in the foreground, but showing only her profile. Deschars wanted her full face, more in the middle distance, dominating the whole scene. Claudia inclined toward the latter, but the countess asserted that the pose lacked character, so Montperrier's opinion was upheld.

"I think," said Montperrier, "that the Aged and Incurable will be satisfied with us, madame."

The remark was apropos and the countess was grateful to the young politician for recalling the purpose, momentarily forgotten, of all these praiseworthy efforts.

When the time came to make the poses definite, Montperrier said that Deschars's designs had to be transposed into the Parisian mode by a specialist. Signora Farnini, one-time star of the Scala, was chosen and took up her work. She was a heavy, matronly body with an obliging smile, who devoted herself to Deschars and kept him endlessly busy. Montperrier was liberated and became the most devoted of Claudia's collaborators. All of this was in a bustle of people discussing costumes and poses, asking questions and cutting the answers short by incongruous counter questions, laughing, joking, flirting, telling scandalous tales, helping the Aged

Incorrigibles. Chief among them were: Lucienne Préban, jealously guarded by her Levantine, Count Spiridion Levidi; the beautiful Lady Haward; Mme d'Arrois; the Prince de Luques, of whom everybody asked the truth concerning Mélanie; the Marquis de Bernot, who was only waiting for Montperrier to be put in his place, so that he might offer Harlé his marquisate; and Dumouzin, with his eye ever watchful. There was, besides, a rout of young people, grateful to the Aged Incorrigibles for the chance to live the Marriage at Cana, after Veronese.

Claudia's education was being rapidly completed in this environment. For her it was the world—the world realized in a happy hum of living—and her godfather was only the dream of a dead happiness.

Henri came, or rather let himself be brought, to the rehearsals by a sense of futile duty. He found himself out of place, in the way, and remained dreamily waiting for something to happen which did not happen. Claudia was surrounded, adored, courted on every hand, saw welcome in every pair of eyes. She was proud of her triple power—wealth, beauty, and youth—and found that everything that ruled the world was at her service. She found herself forgetful of Henri's uneasiness, and could not bear the weight of his affection—the only obstacle to her happiness.

What an irony to recall to her, now, the humble friends she had at Ste. Radegonde, those simple creat-

ures, uncouth but gentle, whom she helped for the pure joy of making them happy for a day. How far away it all was now! How much had happened in a few weeks! A world had ended for her!

The Prince de Luques was not making things easier for Puymaufroy. He had had many good times with the marquis, for they had been ruined together and the prince was happy to go into reminiscences because they helped him to diminish the "superiority" of his friend. Claudia was vastly amused, and Puymaufroy was bitterly offended by her amusement.

"Do you know who came in to see me this morning?" De Luques would say. "Moses Bernard; used to be head of the *claque* at the Gymnase. No, he isn't dead. It's incredible. He's still doing a little money-lending, just to have something to do, because he's rich. Oh, I can just see him again, selling and buying, diamonds or titles, with those women. That was the beginning of a great art. It's been perfected since. I'd like to paint for you, dear countess, the despair of our friend the marquis. He was crazy about Valentine Michou of the Gymnase in those days. One day when he was standing behind a prop of some sort he heard Valentine pass a few words with Bernard, some strange confidences about their business. Valentine was the incarnation of the dreams of our youth in those days. She had confided her savings—which were in part the heritage

of our friend—to Bernard who was lending them to Henri. So you see he was lending his own money to himself, at a good rate of interest. Only who would have believed it? Moses was robbing his client. It was a mistake, because Valentine could always check him up through some confession made in the madness of love. Hence the quarrel which surprised the marquis, while Valentine waited for her cue to go on for her big scene. The poor lover was sad for a whole month. He was a fine sou leven then. Now, tell me, have I told anything but the truth?"

Puymaufroy shrugged his shoulders, laughing with bad grace while Claudia and the countess tried very hard to suppress their laughter. De Luques continued with another story. Even when Henri had left and the countess reproached the prince, he did not stop, but proved his point with still another tale.

"You don't even try to prevent Claudia from hearing these things about her godfather," protested the countess, holding Claudia close to her.

"Ah, it's time I was warned. Happily, Mlle. Harlé is not a provincial. She had better learn to know her Paris, because she's going to be its queen some day."

"And is all you've been telling us really Paris?" asked Claudia, maliciously.

"We are Paris."

"Plus something else, surely," retorted the girl.

"Hardly." (The prince was contemptuous.)

"Oh, yes, writers and artists and working people and I don't know what else—people who work for our pleasure and count only by the success we bring them. Society flourishes in us, and what people call 'corruptions' are only the necessary . . . fertilizer for any flowering. I ruined myself magnificently for the profit of Paris. In a way we are doing the same thing now for the Aged——"

"How can you compare the two?" asked the countess.

"Oh, you know it's the same thing. We needn't play with words. Our function is to enjoy; our art is to utilize our enjoyment."

"You are a cynic, prince."

"And you a lovely hypocrite, countess. But I will not abuse my advantage. Let us get on with our work."

It was at "work" that Claudia and Montperrier began to exchange ideas. A remark of Lucienne Préban's, always preoccupied with the thought of her millions, started them.

"Why shouldn't two people dream of developing their ambitions together?" asked Montperrier.

"Together? Does it often happen that a man and a woman have the same ambition?"

"It can happen. The man will dream of a growing power. The woman of increasing adulation. And they will unite, to realize their dream in common.

Imagine a young girl, very beautiful and very rich—like you.”

“I imagine that.”

“Imagine, on the other hand, a man who has the great chance to become——”

“Like you?”

“Like me. Good. What could be more legitimate, more reasonable, than to base the hope of permanent agreement on this foundation of similar interests? It does not even exclude poetry.”

“Reasonable and poetic?”

“‘All I can get’—that’s my motto.”

“It’s very good. But it doesn’t say how these similar interests are to be divided.”

“That’s to be decided in advance.”

“Then suppose we decide, since we are the examples chosen. You will derive a certain advantage in the way of your tailor’s accounts. How shall I be repaid?”

“By our common advantage in the excess of our power. Your pride can take the lion’s share of it.”

“Is that all?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t offer you the kingdom of heaven to rule over.”

“Your modesty pleases me. The heavens will get along without our aid. So will the world, if need be. You prefer not? Well, then, assume that we’re kings of the earth, or what you call the earth. That ought to be amusing the first day and even the second.

But the tenth? And the hundredth? And forever?"

"The mind refreshes its pleasures."

"Does it? I'm not even a princess yet and I'm wearied with *ennui* already."

"If you can't change yourself you must change others."

"Yes. So you will change me and I will change you! How tiresome."

"You're forgetting the poetry."

"How amusing it is—you're afraid to say 'love'."

"Everybody drags in the word."

"It's beautiful all the same."

"That's why the innocent suffer from it."

"You aren't one of them, I suppose?"

"Oh, we all try to escape suffering."

"Then how does it happen that, in spite of all the unhappiness announced in advance, so many men and women give all for love? I don't fool myself. There are times when I envy them."

"Look at them when they return. See their ex-  
piation for the exaltation of a day. Disillusioned  
creatures, weeping because they staked their lives  
on one card; reproaches, hatred, bloodshed, what  
else? And then look at the peace of those who re-  
strained this ephemeral passion and put it in its  
place. Have you seen any more permanent pleas-  
ures than those that come from society?"

"I don't know. I've been taught differently."

"Your godfather! His happiness seems sad enough. The Comtesse de Fourchamps who knows life——"

"Are you setting her up as an example?"

"She's a very superior woman. She will tell you that poetry lasts an hour and marriage forever. That is why the union of interests must be established first."

"So the baron tells us."

"He's a man. You can trust him."

"He told us that from the shelter of marriage we can watch for any passing bit of poetry."

"It seems rather bold for you to repeat it."

"Isn't it proof of my esteem that I dare to bring you face to face with the truth?"

"Perhaps. You must confess that it isn't usual for people to talk as we've been talking."

"Yes. It's usual to conform to the rules of the world and then lie to one's self and to others, with pompous words."

"On the contrary. At our age it is not lying."

"It is time for youth to learn by the experience of age. I am as capable of love as the verse-makers, perhaps more so. But I'd be ashamed to talk to a woman chosen for my companion about her beauty and nothing else."

"It's a pity! Everything contradicts what I have learned. Everything leads me to new risks. And even now I sometimes get a feeling of disgust."

"Does it require so much courage to live in your own time?"

On that the discussion broke up, for Lucienne and Deschars came up to settle a dispute. They brought with them Count Levidi, who was to play the Galilean. Puymaufray could not suppress a smile.

"Poor Crucified one," he thought. "To have had the glory of being defeated in the name of pity and to win, in time, this revenge: that the strongest whom You wished to drag down use You as an instrument of oppressing the poor that You wished to save! How can Claudia be blind to this falsification of words and things? I see the evil of my time but can do nothing to realize the good. What can I offer this child? The example of my defeat, which undeserved luck turned into victory? I cannot tell of the victory. Everywhere lurks the danger of opposing the world! Everywhere the temptation to surrender—as Montperrier must have shown her just now. What were they talking about? They seemed serious and Claudia's face promised little good. Every day I know she is slipping from me. If Deschars loved her less he might save her. He is afraid—as I am."

When they met at night Henri and Deschars tried to console each other. But the letters Henri wrote to Nanette were unhappy, and he was not surprised to find a note from her, one day, announcing that, as she tired of receiving letters that told nothing, she would come to Paris herself.

## CHAPTER XII

**P**UYMAUFRAY was justified in criticizing Maurice. The generation that followed the war of 1870 was a generation of observers. Discouraged from action by the defeat of their elders, our young men devoted themselves to contemplation. They wrote, sang; some of them even thought. But the mainspring of their will never was wound up to the striking point, because it lacked a sufficient concentration of energy. Those that presumptuously assumed the power to act had neither foresight nor method, and only added to the confusion.

Deschars was of his generation. He had travelled over the world merely to see, and had brought back no urgent need of high activity. In that respect Montperrier seemed to have an advantage over him for he had chosen to take part in something which, for good or ill, useful or not, was concerned with the supposed evolution of the future. If Deschars had had a great human object in view he could perhaps have carried off Claudia without argument. But, as he had told Puymaufrey, he aimed at nothing beyond a life of moderate happiness, which he would joyfully make of service to the world, without ever

risking the sudden turns of fortune in the *mêlée* of life. It was exactly what Puymaufroy had done, so he could not be critical. But Puymaufroy had found his dream, and was still dazzled because he had lived it. It was an incredible stroke of Fortune, which was denied to Deschars.

However, Claudia could experience the attraction of a life above the ordinary spectacle of the world. She said things to Montperrier, she mocked herself, unconsciously irritated because she was not yet subdued. But the man who really loved her could still summon her to hazardous heights from which to pass judgment on the swarming life below.

But without the imperious invasion of love, discouraged by social conventions, the discussions of Deschars and Puymaufroy were powerless to detach the girl from the interests of her class. Lacking everything else, these interests were at least a setting for her life. She felt the expediency of these things, was angry at them, and at times asked herself whether it wouldn't be best to accept Montperrier "for the world" and so assure for herself universal approval in the development of her free personality. The countess had done as much and it was an exponent of "reasonable" views who had held her up as an example.

"And I, too, am beautiful," thought Claudia.

Then, as if impelled by a sudden decision, she set

herself before the mirror. She studied herself in detail, gave herself a generous but strict examination, reckoning up the weak points and the advantages she could show.

Her waist was free and graceful, and artistically disposed. She could show it to advantage even in natural attitudes. The way she did her hair—a striking contrast with the bright youthfulness of her expression—might have been shocking, as Puymaunfray said. "But that was the style, and one had to yield to the passing whims of style as to other conventional laws. She approved of her small, wilful chin and her brave little mocking nose. She seemed to take great satisfaction in the expressive play of her nostrils. Her mouth was small, the lips perhaps just a little too thin. The rouge-stick was a useful aid; the more indispensable since flaming henna put nature's colour in the shade.

"The great fault women have is making their lips too red," the countess used to say. "Then they have to overwork the pencil on their eyelashes."

"Nothing in excess," said the Greek oracle. It was enough to heighten the colour, remembering always that the eyes must dominate everything. Claudia's eyes, always changing, with golden lights in depths of green, were the surest shaft in her armour. She examined them with a fresh curiosity every time, questioned them, wondered whence their power came; and, finding no answer, was uneasy—as

a fowler might be with a net in which he himself might be caught.

“What magic”—she thought—“in a drop of water, which a ray of light strikes into rainbow colours! What do we think we can see there? It attracts hearts—irresistibly; holds them, intoxicates them with promises, maddens them with hope, delivers them over to ineffable joys and to unutterable sorrows! It is a mystery. And can the thing we think we see ever be realized? Or is it only an illusion? I shall know—after the test; too late, perhaps. No matter. Happy or unhappy, I have the magic talisman that conquers men. I can use it or abuse it, as I please. Abuse it, above all! Tremendous joy!”

For whom or against whom? They were questions without answers. Montperrier?—a good investment or a bad one; no one could tell. Deschars?—a generous madness, which always has tempted humanity, and comes to grief in the end. What he wanted was the last word from those eyes, the last word which Claudia herself demanded in vain. With him life would end in a quiet, monotonous happiness, while Montperrier opened a career of infinite joys, chaotic perhaps, but at least intense in their time. The moment was coming when she would have to choose. Until now she had had no greater perplexity than the development of the power of her magic eyes by vain tricks. What was there left to think of?

People said that morphine put the flaming tiger in your eyes and besides made you dream the endless dreams which made earth a paradise. . . ?

Alas! She had not looked deep enough! Under the false high lights of the make-up she had not seen her youth, her simple and lovely youth, trying to fight its way out, disfigured by the mask of falsehood; youth, which would have granted her that last word, sought in vain from laborious appearances; youth, which out of its mistakes makes a virtue of naiveté; youth, which abandons itself to life without calculation, which, while it waits for the hour when it must pay for its errors, knows the intensest joy of living in the sheer sincerity of life.

Far from such thoughts Claudia finished the general inspection of her person by a meticulous observation of her hands, still youthfully large, which an artist was refining every day. "The hand tells everything," the countess had said, and indeed her own long, perfidious ones, coming down to her rosy finger-tips, told much. She had taught Claudia an instructive and amusing game to play at dinner parties. You glance around the table at all the hands and pass judgment on their owners. Then, and only then, you verify by looking at their faces. She said that they were the surest psychological indexes: a connoisseur of women always begins with the hands and finishes with the ears, where secret vulgarities are revealed.

One thing was forgotten in this review: the spirit, which ought to reveal and embellish everything else. Where could she find the mirror of her conscience except in the saddened eyes of her godfather against whom she was defending herself. And to whom could she entrust herself? To the Comtesse de Fourchamps? Even to Claudia's eyes her art of pretending conveyed every impression except that of truth.

And it was to falsehood that she would sacrifice her pursuit of the true happiness which her uncle—who loved her and suffered for her—wanted. The thought persisted; and the fear of finding deep within her the same reproachful glance which had brooded over her since her childhood compelled her to escape.

The thought of Deschars also possessed her. Memories and obscure hopes attached her to this childhood friend—and esteem for the proud timidity of the man who had concentrated all his power, confronted all dangers, yet never spoke of them; a striking contrast to the superficial Montperrier who always made his worth known. But she felt a dull irritation with him, with herself, wounded by the disaccord with the world which seemed to have the highest formula of life and from which she would not consent to be separated.

Maurice had definitely noticed that in the last rehearsals Claudia and Montperrier did not always discuss *The Marriage at Cana*. Various signs warned

him that serious things were being said: Claudia's grave face, the intense look of her partner. There could be but one subject that could inspire such attitudes, as of forces gathered to attack or defend; these silences, these words without gestures, the expression of solemnity on the brink of the inevitable.

Deschars was in love. He was enslaved by the sovereign charm that draws a man to a woman. The man is sometimes weak because he loves; the woman, strong, knowing nothing of love. He had set his dream on the unconscious soul of a girl of twenty and followed it—lost. He loved. He had confessed it in a hundred obvious or imperceptible ways, and sometimes he had fancied that a blush or a quivering of the eyelids had answered; an illusion, perhaps. He loved; and because he wanted to be loved in turn he forged reasons to believe that he was. He knew the obstacle: the candour and honesty of his thinking, which had made him what he was, which had gained by travel abroad, and had become hostile to the established order of our hypocritical civilization. He was a rebel, the legitimate object of the combined efforts of all the powers. He knew it. He was not displeased to find Montperrier before him as a representative of this world, for his low greed must revolt Claudia in time. But what if disgust came too late? It was the decisive question which he dared not ask himself, counting on the irresolute girl, who was swimming with the current instead of waiting for the

lofty power of love. He lived in anxiety and exquisite pain, at once desperate and hopeful, soaring to the heights and falling into the abyss, eager for the horizon to clear, when he should set his course by the stars.

The look of apparently triumphant joy in Montperrier's eyes startled Deschars from his reveries. Without further argument with himself he made his decision.

Some days later he found Claudia in the garden one evening after dinner with Harlé and Puymaufroy. The moment seemed propitious for conversation. The girl, too, felt that something was going to be defined between them. When she saw him come she divined by the trembling of her own voice that the hour had come for him, and for her. She hoped that he would speak freely—would open his heart and get his chance. Perhaps a ray of light for her would be struck off by his words—the light of reason, since it was reason she demanded now that she had renounced the right to feel.

Twilight had come, the clear twilight of the first days of spring. Lamps were lit, making wan spots in the failing daylight. Dominic was marching Henri round and round the grass plot, explaining in all its details the certain success of his great project. As the two men came and went with the regularity of clock work—one lost in his own triumph, the other oppressed by fear of what might be said a

few paces away from him—the younger couple sat down on a bench for the talk which might decide their destiny.

“Well, mademoiselle,” began Deschars, “is *The Marriage at Cana* getting on?”

“Oh, not at all,” answered Claudia, determined to cut short the interview. “The Comtesse de Fourchamps will have to take over the reins, because M. Montperrier, who has assumed control of everything, talks a lot and does nothing.”

“I’m surprised. You seemed so busy the other day.”

“He was telling me his tale of love. Why such a face? It isn’t the first time it’s happened to him. Oh, he didn’t pretend it was a burning passion.”

“Then what is it?”

“A gentle flame, with little clinkers, artistically arranged. It isn’t very warm, nor very magnificent, but it may last—under the ashes—longer than great fires.”

“Let’s see. That depends also on what’s burning. You know very well what M. Montperrier wants of you.”

“My money? I never doubted that. He does me the honour not to allow any illusion on that score, and I esteem him the more.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s very simple. Why does one want a wife? For what she is, apparently. Well, I am I, with my

physical and moral beauty—if I may use the word—and the social beauty of my wealth, which is just as much a part of me as are my features or my individual characteristics. They will change with age—to my disadvantage; but my money will remain, and grow. All of that is I, you see. I must be accepted as I am. I can't be angry because I am desired for my money any more than because I'm loved for my eyes. However, I assure you that although M. Montperrier doesn't talk poetry to me, he is not insensible to my charms."

"Oh, it is terrible for you to talk that way. You are killing me wilfully. Because even if I never have told you, you know that I love you, forever: for yourself, not for your father's money."

"Yes, I know it. And I am provoking you into saying it after you have told me in so many other ways, because the time has come for both of us to look deeply into ourselves. You love me for myself, you say. What does that mean? If my father were ruined to-morrow you would remain faithful to me and M. Montperrier would seek pastures new. True. On the other hand, if I were suddenly afflicted with a big red nose or were disfigured by an accident, M. Montperrier would gain the prize of constancy while you, after noble attempts to cling to the beauty of my soul, would be compelled to confess yourself beaten."

"How can you joke about such things?"

"I am not joking. I am only transferring to my own case the remark about Cleopatra's nose and the destiny of the world. Do you dare to say that you would love me if I were ugly?"

"I love you."

"You see. You cannot lie——"

"I love you and M. Montperrier does not love you."

"He loves something else in me. I wanted you to understand——"

"I understand nothing except that I fled from you to the other end of the world and that I found you everywhere but here, where, by the mischance of life, there have been hours when I have not known you at all."

"What to do? I know that you love me with a pure love. I should be a miserable creature to deny your disinterestedness, the nobility of your heart. I do not love M. Montperrier in the sense in which you understand the word. I will make you a more complete confession. Without speaking of our old friendship, I like you, and it makes me unhappy to talk to you this way. But I must be loyal to myself and reason things out, if I lack courage to resist the world. I suffer more than I can say—for myself, for you, for my uncle, who, I am sure, would be happy to leave me in your care. I know that in certain circumstances—I can't say what they are—I could have made real your dream."

"Well?" he queried, anxiously—taking her hand.

"Well," she answered, painfully—withdrawing her hand from the gentle pressure, "those circumstances don't exist to-day. The way we think about love has changed. To-day we reason it out. A man may indulge himself in the luxury of the old style; but I have to live the life of my time."

"And does modern life forbid love?"

"It puts it into another setting. Go to the park at Versailles. You see what's left of the shepherdesses? It was a beautiful day-dream. Now we are awake."

"And to what joys?"

"To the simple realities about which our descendants may write poetry some day. Reality, if I understand it, is the struggle of everybody against everybody else. We must win or go under. We women are for winning."

"Not *all*. There are women——"

"The conquerors have rights over us, I tell you. You have dreamed of me in another rôle, and something within me pleads for you, I confess. However, the attraction of victorious power, the glory of brilliant triumphs, carries me along with my time, in spite of myself, and I let myself go. You do not care about my vanities. It's very fine. But I am only a woman. Everything carries me along to those who are marching to victory. I have already experienced the desire to command, and I feel, in

spite of myself, that the power of the world is the strongest."

"I am a force, too. The triumph you are talking about is play-acting. The world is a lie, and I . . . I am the truth."

"A lie that lasts as long as life itself is very near to the truth."

"You will be disabused to-morrow."

"No. Because I have no illusions and I see whither I am going. For the life for which I am preparing, all I need is marriage."

"And my crime is that I am offering you love, isn't it? It is too much. I think I am going mad, and—forgive me for saying it—I think you are going mad yourself. You are young, beautiful, rich, and mistress of your life. I know your spirit is noble, no matter what you say, and I have seen you when you were good-hearted. From your childhood you have had the great good fortune of leaning on the greatest affection, of the noblest heart I know. And now all that is best in you, all you have imbibed of the exquisite tenderness that has brooded over you and loves you, is going to waste—because the great fighter, M. Harlé, has a whim—because Montperrier wants your millions and makes a theory out of his own selfish interests, or because the Comtesse de Fourchamps has whispered poisonous advice in your ears——"

"No. No. The countess did not need to advise me. Her life is object lesson enough."

"All right, then. But her life is not Life. You are taking a drawing room for the universe, and *what* a drawing room!"

"The one into which my father brought me."

"M. Harlé cares for nothing but his business. What you have discovered around you is appearances, nothing else. Ah! If you could see through their lying eyes down into the abyss of their souls. Some day the veil will drop. Then—remember our talk of to-day. I'm not speaking for myself any more because I know that I am lost. You want to reason, because you do not love. Ah, if only you would reason! Pardon! The moment is too serious for me to hide my thoughts. You say to yourself: 'Love is an accident of life.' You set aside for love what will remain of your soul—wearied, used up, worn old with the immense attempt at universal conquest for the appearance of happiness. In the madness of *appearing to be*, of deceiving yourself and others, you are sacrificing—for all your talk about reality—the most beautiful reality, the royal generosity of yourself in the power of love. You talk about love without knowing what love is, and it isn't your fault if it hasn't been awakened in you yet. You do not know that you cannot make terms with love, that it demands your whole being—takes it, transforms everything, you and the world both—and that, by the impetuous embrace of two lives, the universe is made glorious so long as life endures.

You do not know, you could not know, these things, and you are going to pronounce the most terrible sentence upon yourself. How can you set life outside your grasp before you have experienced it? If you were like some women you know—— But you have a heart! What torments you are laying up for yourself in the future.”

“I have listened to you, at least. I admire you. And I am sorry for you. You have said some beautiful things, and said them beautifully. I see only one fault in them, and that is that they are all a dream. You reproach me for knowing little of life and nothing of love. But I know what everyone can see. Do you know what has struck me most in this great crowd of people? That they have tried everything and nothing has succeeded. I see all the possible combinations of fortunes, and age, and character, and feeling. Blonds with brunettes, rich with poor, good with wicked (or even with good, if you want), the ambitious with the indifferent or with intriguers; all, I tell you, have been tried. And listen to the cry of disappointment and rage rising from the earth. I know that all these people said things to each other, but they soon found out that it was all an intoxication and when they were through with their folly they wept over themselves and cursed each other and tore at each other. Your embrace of two lives is a flash of light, with ashes forever after.”

“So what hurts you in love is that it is too beauti-

ful. You would prefer it more commonplace. I think it is unfortunate for you to feel that way before you have attempted the adventure. You alone can judge your strength and measure your desires with it. You say that love is a common madness of which everyone, or nearly everyone, eventually despairs. Good. But how do you know whether these men and women who cry out their eternal regret for the great lost vision do not prefer their misery a hundred times to your bitter indifference? How do you know that they do not carry one great ecstasy with them, even to the grave? And then, why do you want me to count the millions and millions that have fallen? Do you admit that in every ten thousand centuries there are two who realize the ideal of love? Is it not the noblest act of human audacity to throw one's life into the chance, for the highest achievement of life? You said to me one day that you had thought I was brave. Must I now turn the reproach upon you?"

"Courage is not insanity. Do you remember that little poem about the apple blossom that was loved by the bee? And when it became a little green apple the mouse loved it. And when it was ripe, the sparrow loved it. What shall I be ten years from now—or you?"

"Yes, it is a problem, to undergo the changes of life harmoniously. Love performs this miracle because it renews itself."

## THE STRONGEST

"Or departs. For it is a miracle for two separate lives to develop in the same setting of feelings and wills. You can't risk your life on a conjectural miracle. Don't I know that you consider my fortune odious—that if it vanished to-morrow you would think it a stroke of luck for me? We don't feel the same way on that point, my dear friend, and that makes me afraid. I belong to the world, you see, and cannot break away. I am in the camp of the strongest, as my father calls them, and you are deliberately taking your place among the conquered. Fortune, birth, the hazards of fate, group people together for the victories of a day—which you despise, but in whose vanities I must find my happiness. You do not believe in any of the things that I am compelled to believe. You love none of the things that I am destined to love."

"No. No. I will not let you say that. You know that I love everything, everything on earth or in life, or in heaven. I love mankind, and that is what you probably have against me, at bottom. I love a life of action—yes, of action—in my modest sphere, in which the noble efforts of the past continue to work. I love life for the beauty of its dreams. I love it even to the point of death which brings forgetfulness of the sorrow of things. I do not need to pigeonhole causes and effects, to bow down before a word. I love you, I tell you, and I am a conqueror, for the whole world will fall before

my will! I love you, and that is my way of praying and adoring. I love everything at its highest, for I will not belittle this eternal power so that one man can oppress another by it. I love you, and my madness is such that I have put all my love into your eyes. How proud I should be to make the whole world seem enchanted to you! You are punishing me. So be it! I will undergo the punishment proudly. A dream as beautiful as mine can leave joy behind even when it is vanished, even in the sadness of your reality!"

Claudia, beaten, was silent for a time. Then, very softly:

"Who knows?" she murmured. "Perhaps you are right. But you cannot reason about everything. I couldn't do what you will do, create a bitter felicity for myself out of the wreck of a dream. Each one of us has his fate. And mine, as M. Montperrier says, is a combination of self-interests."

"You, you alone will create your fate."

"No. I tell you that it is the world which tempts me and wants me. It is the sum of all the forces to which all my money-power is due. And I am going in for the pleasures of ruling the world, which you call false—and perhaps you are right."

"I shall be eternally unhappy to see you perish without being able to lift a hand. I beg you, help yourself, help yourself while yet there is time. In spite of everything, your eyes have not deceived me."

Something within you will rebel against the fate that you have chosen."

"Then sha'n't I be as free as the rest to seek whatever diversions may come? You know very well that the world allows everything to the strongest."

"No. You will not want that."

"Very well, then, I will have forgetfulness."

"You cannot always forget when you want to."

"Perhaps. I know some ways——"

He had risen.

"Au revoir? or good-bye?" he asked.

"Au revoir. Won't you always be my friend?"

"Yes, I think so, but far from you—very far. When I say 'good-bye' it will be forever."

He took the hand she gave him and fancied he felt a shudder of sorrow pass through it. He was about to cry out, to make a last effort. But with a despairing movement the hand was taken from his, and Deschars dropped into the night as if the last thread that had kept him suspended over the abyss had snapped.

Claudia remained seated, repeating the words, "When I say 'good-bye' it will be forever."

"And yet, if in my extremity I should call him?" she thought. "Where would he be then? I shall have my uncle, my poor uncle. . . . What will happen to him? Oh, if I resigned myself to his ideal of happiness I should rebel the next day, and he would

suffer as much as I should. He would suffer more, because it would be his fault."

Harlé's voice was heard at the other end of the garden. The two strollers had stopped by a clump of trees and Puymaufroy, listening for the slightest sound, was nervously hearing a lecture on the use of the masses in the interests of the few. If he had not had his cigar he could not have concealed his anxiety which grew more intense as time sped. Finally Claudia appeared—alone. It was over. The battle was lost.

"How's that, baby?" Harlé cried. "Has M. Deschars gone without saying good-night?"

"He didn't want to disturb you," answered Claudia. "You seemed so absorbed in each other. He asked me to make his excuses."

"It's true," observed Dominic, "that I've been interested in this conversation. There's nothing like expressing your ideas for clearing them up in your own mind—best of all if you array them in battle order under the enemy's eyes. For you are the enemy, my poor friend. We shall never agree."

A movement of the shoulders was Henri's only answer. Talkative and noisy, with vibrant contentment in his voice, Harlé moved toward the salon where the lamps cast a halo of light. The others followed in silence. Claudia had an impulse to fling herself upon her uncle, to cry, to weaken totally, in

reaction from the stiffness of the hour that had just passed: Henri was oppressed, trembled with an irresistible necessity to follow the fleeing Deschars, to bring him back, to take both these children in his arms and say: "Love one another."

Who knows what might have come if he had been able to win Claudia at that moment? If he could shame her and prevent her from sacrificing her youth in a fit of madness? But *the other one* was there, father by the will of society and by the law, imperious, jovial, invincible—the strongest!

Hardly had Puymaufroy gone when Harlé seized both Claudia's hands and, looking deep into her eyes, demanded:

"Well, did you settle account with your noble lover?"

"I? How did you know?"

"Don't I always know what I need to know? Do you think I had to hang around at your rehearsals in order to know what was going on?"

"I would like to know whether you've been told everything?" said Claudia, anxious to discover whether the countess had spoken about Montperrier.

"I know what I ought to know. That's enough."

"And you never said anything to me."

"Why should I insult you by doubting your good sense? You're my daughter, I suppose. Still better, you are my pupil, and I am proud to say it. I have worked and I am triumphing for you, for us. Surely

my life is an example and a far better lesson than all the preaching of your uncle?"

"And you aren't a bit afraid that his sermons could turn me from your way of thinking?"

"Not a bit. I know old Henri. He wastes himself in dreams. The happiness he wants for you is inevitably what he would want for himself, after a wasted life. Deschars is his friend: there is a natural affinity between useless men. I understood all right that he would be happy if there were a marriage. But what could he say that would prevail in your soul—where I am glad to recognize myself—against the definite clear lessons of the world? So I never lectured you. Lectures don't change youth."

"Uncle loves me very much."

"Love him, too. But don't obey him."

"And yet, if he were right!"

"If he were right he wouldn't be a victim of life and I shouldn't be at the height of success. Because we're going to be kings, little one, simply kings! Do you want to be a queen?"

"I certainly do. Especially if there aren't any revolutions."

"Silly! The show-kings are overthrown. There are no revolutions against money. There is no power against the strongest."

When Claudia had gone to her room she thought over her father's words, and although she felt their truth she could not get over a vague fear of the un-

known. Deschars in his despair had spoken with such a sureness of thought, she felt that he was sustained by so profound a faith in the power of love, that she stopped, despite her settled will, before an irreparable act. Was it true that love can carry us to the dizzy heights where nothing of earth can touch us? Perhaps. But it must be love.

"I'm not in love," thought Claudia. "Maurice himself told me so. 'You are reasoning, because you don't love.' Then why this anxiety, this torment, this fear of myself which I am hiding from everyone? Why did the terrible word 'good-bye' make my heart cold with everlasting despair? Why do I feel the need of seeing him again—*him*—before I abandon myself to my fate, to ask him to forgive me?"

While Claudia vainly sought sleep Deschars told the dismal tale to Puymaufroy. All night he repeated the story incoherently, with exclamations of despair.

"You are my only hope," Deschars repeated. "All I can do is love her. I shall always love her. Suppose they have made her so that she can no longer love; suppose they have killed the noble heart she got from her mother, in order to make her greater and more beautiful? I have lost all power, all energy of living. I came here confident, joyous, as sure of her as of myself. You see, I didn't know what to do. And here I am crying when I ought to snatch her away, in spite of herself, and

carry her off. But if her heart is really dead, what use is it?"

For hours they sat there face to face, broken, silent, without thoughts, when, at dawn, a hurried step in the ante-room startled them, the door opened brusquely, and Nanette appeared on the threshold.

"You stopped writing," she said, "and here I am."

She could say no more. The sight of Henri—pale, defeated, with haggard eyes and deep furrows in his ravaged face—frightened her. She understood. Without asking useless questions she said:

"At any rate, our little girl isn't dead. I have come. Now we shall see."

And when she was alone with Henri:

"Come, tell me the whole thing. I won't whisper a word of it."

When he had told her the old woman went on:

"It's true that the child spoke cruelly, but what does that prove? That she doesn't love M. Deschars, and has told him Heaven knows what stories in order to soften the blow. We have to find out what she thinks herself. I believe, as you do, that Maurice would have made her a fine husband, but there are others. The important thing is that she must not marry this M. Montperrier whom you mention. I'll see to that! But first, let's get some rest."

Under the pretext of being tired to death she made Henri, too, prepare for bed, and—refusing to talk—left him, so that he had a much-needed sleep.

When Henri woke, after midday, Nanette was already at Harlé's home. Claudia welcomed her affectionately, but could not hide her fatigue and nervousness after a sleepless night. Her features were sadly drawn, her face trembled perceptibly, and the bright eyes and dry, vibrant voice seemed good signs to Nanette. She said that, since Puymaufray hadn't written, she thought he was ill. She made no allusion to topics which might arouse resentment. She only said that things weren't going at all well at Ste. Radegonde.

"You can't imagine, ma'm'selle, how much they need you down there. Everybody. Because what they need more than anything else is a kind word. M. Harlé has installed new machinery and enlarged the plant. They say it's producing double already. And while the owner is growing richer, the rules for the workers are becoming harder. The foremen have got orders. There is a lot of discontent. You ought to be there to see it. You ought to come down for a fortnight. Your interests are involved, too, ma'm'selle."

"I'll speak to my father, but I can't leave Paris. There are unfortunates everywhere, dear Nanette, not at Ste. Radegonde alone. I am busy with a charity bazaar."

"You are my own dear. Tell me what it is. Perhaps I could give you a hand."

"Yes, of course. I have a flower booth. Nat-

urally I'll have helpers. But if you want you may stick close to me and you'll be a great help."

"I shall be very happy. When will it take place?"

"In four days. You'll have to make yourself pretty."

"Not too pretty, so as not to humiliate the poor."

"Oh! The poor won't be there."

"So much the worse. It's a pleasure you're denying yourself."

Four days later Nanette, who had with difficulty persuaded Henri to drop his funereal air, arrived at the gardens of the Oppert mansion, marvellously decorated for the bazaar. It was a fairyland. Booths strung with ribbons, flowers, banners setting the April foliage ablaze; crowds of young sellers in gay costumes, a rout of colours, cries, laughter; against the distant background an invisible orchestra. Nanette's eyes and mouth opened simultaneously.

"Oh, Ma'm'selle Claudia," she cried, "is that how you do charity in Paris?"

Claudia's booth—a great flowering nook of mimosas, orchids, roses, and lilacs—was the guerdon of youth on the armour of spring. She was dressed in a simple white foulard, a striking contrast to the bright colours of the setting, showing her melancholy smile in sharp relief. Each passer-by received a bouquet from one of her aides, and was allowed to leave an offering on the silver plate. Groups gath-

ered in the aisles, around the grass plots, sheltered from the springtime sun. Visitors passed by, with a smile or a nod, or stopped for a brief conversation.

Deschars and Puymaufroy came in turn. They tried not to linger lest they might interfere with sales. Deschars was very calm, as if nobly pitying. Puymaufroy took the two flowers that Claudia and Nanette offered him, and, with an affectionate smile, put them in his buttonhole. Montperrier diplomatically made but a slight stop at the booth and negligently dropped some bills on the plate. The dowry was already in action. Deschars's two louis for a rose seemed mean in comparison. Nanette, whose sole duty was to hand out bouquets, listened and admired but understood nothing.

Lunch served on little tables amid the flowers brought the group together. Claudia and Harlé, with the countess and the baron, were first; then came Mme. du Peyrouard, followed by Montperrier. Deschars could not be found, and Puymaufroy had made some excuse. Over the champagne the baron asked to be introduced to Nanette and insisted that she clink glasses with him to the health of Puymaufroy.

"With great pleasure, M'sieur le Baron, although I don't believe in wishes. My father used to say that if wishes were horses, † eggars would ride."

"Your father must have been a singular sort of person," answered the baron, gaily. "Still, a wish is a nice thing. And besides, there must be

pedestrians. Or what should we do with the sidewalks?"

In the evening they balanced accounts. Counting the sale of tickets for the *tableaux vivants* they had taken in two hundred and eighteen thousand francs of which Claudia had taken nearly forty thousand. Lucienne Préban herself had only taken in thirty-seven thousand. It was a triumph which Claudia and Harlé both savoured. They were bound to be grateful to Montperrier who had unostentatiously herded all the government people down in front of the booth. To him Claudia owed her three thousand francs advantage over Lucienne Préban, as the countess pointed out. Harlé was particularly grateful to the young man for a cleverly arranged conversation with the Minister of the Interior, president of the Council, who, after complimenting Claudia, announced that he was deeply interested in the *Universal Daily*, announcements of which had been posted on every billboard within the past eight days.

When they left the Faubourg St. Honoré, Claudia and Nanette got out of their carriage at the Rond-point des Champs-Élysées and started to walk toward the Place de l'Étoile, so that Claudia could get rid of a headache, due to too much talking, she said.

They had hardly gone ten steps when a very decently dressed old woman accosted them in a low voice, holding out a trembling hand. Claudia, unable to find her purse, shook her head. Nanette

was shocked by the contrast between the refusal and the sumptuous charity of the hour before.

She stopped and gave the old woman a one-franc piece. At the sight of the silver coin the beggar was convulsed with sobs and cried in a choking voice: "Oh, thank you, madame, thank you. If you only knew! If you could only know! I will pray for you—I will pray." And she started to run madly toward the faubourg, disappearing before they could ask a question.

"Oh, Lord," groaned Nanette. "To think that there are people so miserable that the sight of a franc puts them into such a state!"

"Well, you see, we give. I gave forty thousand francs to-day."

"To whom?"

"I don't know. To people I'll never see."

"You wouldn't do that at Ste. Radegonde, Ma'm'selle Claudia. It is good to see the unfortunate, to listen to them and to talk to them. It is a good thing for us."

"Yes, my uncle says that."

"He does that, too."

"Do you think, Nanette, that he ever gave forty thousand francs in one day—like me?"

"Not in his whole life. But he has given more. He has given his friendship, his trouble, he has sympathized, and he has been loved for it. He is loved. Do you think you can weigh goodness on the scale

with money? You get hundreds and thousands out of people and have a good time doing it, and you don't ever take the trouble to find out whom you are helping with all that money. And you think you are doing more than the finest man on earth. And here a miserable woman asks you for alms. You pass by without ever caring to know anything about her. She almost fainted for joy for a franc, and if you had given her only one of your gloves she could have lived on it for three or four years."

Claudia looked at her gloves, each button of which was a small pearl, a refinement of luxury disapproved of by Henri but done in imitation of the countess.

"It is settled," she thought, angrily. "They are all in a conspiracy against my pleasures."

And Nanette, who could not remain silent under a reproach—and from Claudia, upon her Henri—was suddenly calm.

"I've made a stupid mistake," she said to herself.

## CHAPTER XIII

**T**HE *Universal Daily* was only a month old and its success had already passed beyond the hopes of its founders. All the statesmen of the Republic acclaimed Dominic Harlé's stroke of genius. He understood the masses which, as he loved to say, would rather be informed than taught. "The busy man," he would say to Oppert, "can't be bothered. He wants to know approximately and quickly what is going on around him. Between smokes you have to provide him with a very simple judgment more or less agreeing with present-day ideas, which he must respect in order to live. My idea is to give it to him, also to his wife, busy with housekeeping or a new dress. Every man must find his support in the accepted opinions of society in order to take his share in the common life. Whether they are prejudices or eternal truths does not matter. The thinkers of the next century will decide that as they please. A solid basis of current ideas—that's the surest foundation of life."

"Splendid, my dear friend," agreed the baron. "Never forget it. Look at the great public we've won simply by putting our social catechism in the

form of anecdotes. Stick to that, for your life. And, above all, don't let them suspect that you want to influence them. Just omit—or colour—your information. What you need is the trick of it."

Since he had conceived the programme, Harlé had the glory of realizing it. As the conqueror is surrounded by warriors the paper-maker, by the mere power of action, found himself surrounded by the élite. He counted among his readers the farmers, the shepherds on the mountain slopes, and the crowned heads of Europe. It was his triumph.

The factory at Ste. Radegonde expanded enormously. Crowds of builders descended on the village, and there was a constant procession of new machines behind the high walls they erected. Every day came new orders for further development. It seemed that there could be no limit. The number of employés had more than doubled and recruiting still continued. Whole cities were thrown up for the workers, with schoolhouses, aid stations, shops, and chapels, keeping pace with the factory. It was a whole city of men, women, and children, chained to the machine for their living, and chained by their living to the one who set them to work, for they were dependent on the master for every need of body and soul, by his wages compelled to yield, to kneel before his benevolence, as enslaved as were ever those serfs whose emancipation we celebrate with such gratitude to ourselves. A change in the

name, as the baron said, and under the changing words the everlasting mastery of the strongest.

The dismantled old town had rebuilt itself magnificently, losing only the picturesque beauty of its ancient walls. The feudal chief had returned, master of human lives, dispensing joy in his benevolence, or punishment in anger; decreeing with a darkening brow that chains should be restored, or shifted, or decreeing death. The murderous selfishness of the strongest remains unchanged in the various settings of changing society and revives under new names the slaveries abolished under the old. Is there any law but the law of force between those that want to mount and those that have reached the heights and wish to intensify their superiority?

"When all the forms of the abuse of power have been exhausted," Baron Oppert said, "then the peace of perfect justice will reign on earth."

"I can't wait until then," answered Harlé, whose activity was spreading from Paris to Ste. Radegonde with a new fury.

Harlé was not cruel and took as little pleasure as did his hero Napoleon in the torturous sufferings on which his glory was built: He was insensitive merely, like an accountant who never wonders what his figures may prove. It is the mastering force for the leaders of men on the road to the great slaughterhouses of war or industry. What could a Puymaufroy know of it?

"Well, will you admit now that I was right?" Harlé asked his friend. "Am I or am I not master of the great social forces which guide the world? I am not speaking of money, which is only the expression of the whole thing. Look at the poor wretches who say they have power and tell me if any one of them really governs the masses more effectively than I do. That's because I have really understood this great enemy, the mob, the terror of the governing classes, and I was able to formulate its spirit. And now, since I've got the crowd I've got everybody dependent on me, everybody who wants to do anything. The opposition is fighting shadows. The governments obey me and the Church is friendly because my foundations are dug deep. It is I who keep the Government by the strongest in action, according to our modern formulas."

"Possibly," said Henri. "But I still say that the weak will have their day, too."

"But they have it now, my friend. Every day that passes is theirs. Look about you. They come into our ranks one by one, they share in our advantages, enter into our spirit and our interests: they become more ardent than we are in the battle against the weaker."

"I am speaking of justice for all."

"That's for heaven: I am not impious. I don't want to realize it here."

Claudia listened to this discussion, which she had

heard so often, and for the first time it struck home to her. Her father's situation had become unreasonably greater and puffed her with a pride of power corrupting the finer qualities of her spirit. Dazzled by a vision of royalty she let herself be carried farther and farther away along the mad current, away from her uncle, a sad rebel against the union of the strongest to dominate the earth. Unquestionably she loved him, wanted to love him. But what could she do if they could not agree, "since their tastes were not of the same world?" she asked. For henceforth she thought of herself as of the aristocracy, and the Marquis de Puymaufroy was sinking into utter treason.

It was incredible but Harlé was even now only a chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. The minister himself had brought him the decoration apologizing for not doing more at the moment. A friendly interview followed and the head of the *Universal Daily* was pleased to promise his protection to the Cabinet member.

"I've never read anything of yours," he said. "I am too busy doing things to find time to read. But capable judges tell me that you know a lot and have a ready pen. I know that you didn't always defend the right side. It seems that you were once very radical, some few years ago. But youth must pass! It is past, isn't it? If it is, you can be sure I'll be happy if I can ever serve you."

The statesman bowed, deeply embarrassed by this frankness. Harlé was afraid of frightening him and wanted to show that he was a good fellow.

"I assure you," he said, as he might have said "thank you" for a light, "I'm pleased with your little ribbon. I see you haven't anything in your button-hole. Pity. You ought to set a good example."

"But, M. Harlé," said the minister, "it was to set a good example that the Government gave you——"

"I admit that you couldn't do it without us. The great handlers of men will always be kings of the earth, and I say that without false modesty."

"Kings? How do you mean that? The Republic——"

"Of course. I know that tune. I am more of a republican than you are, my dear minister, because the Republic is *me!* Ah! you do not protest? In the old days kings clad themselves in armour and put ridiculous crowns on their heads in order to govern the people. Duels to the death were fashionable in those days. Public opinion demanded it. You had to fight. The King had his choice of opponents. That's all. It wasn't very grand. In any case, it's done with. Since Napoleon there's nothing to be done but strictly mathematical slaughter. The human race nowadays wants to live, and that is what we, simple, middle-class people, are here for. We satisfy their need. We set people to work. What else do they want? They produce and they

live: that is a great step ahead of the time when they massacred each other. I think that service is worth its tithe, don't you? They will talk a long time about the tax. Fortunately, with your help, we ourselves fix the rate of taxation, and I think that's right because that's just where you get your spirit of enterprise, which makes our usefulness so superior. So-called thinkers deny our right to the gratitude of the crowd. Why shouldn't they be grateful to us who distribute the wherewithal of life, since they have never stopped praising those that led them into slaughter? There's only one answer to the dreamers. Human justice means the liberty of everybody, leading to the sovereign authority of the strongest, through the ways of peace, as formerly through the paths of war. That is why, my dear sir, you are decorating me in the name of the Republic. Isn't that so?"

"I admire your lucidity of expression, sir, and the rigorous logic of your deductions."

"We shall meet again. Please present my compliments to the President of the Republic."

It was on the night of the *tableaux vivants* that Harlé came to his apotheosis. The rehearsals had languished suddenly; all minds were in suspense owing to the number of great ideas. From day to day they had quarrelled. However, the time came when everything was ready, even *The Marriage at*

Cana which had to be composed quite differently from Veronese's conception. When they went down to the Salon Carré to look for ideas, Montperrier and Alphonse de Valbois were stupefied to find that in all its magnificence the picture gave place to but three women besides the Saviour and His Mother. It was impossible to think of putting a little dog on the table, or to show a princess picking her teeth. The genius of De Valbois was therefore freed from the shackling necessity of making a servile copy, and he gave himself free rein. The richness of the costumes, for which Morgan's knowledge had been invoked, with the splendour of young faces, made a spectacle highly agreeable to the eye.

Harlé had given free hand to his architect. It is enough to mention that fact. The splendour of the decorations surpassed anything ever seen in that style. The Aged and Incurable might well have been proud of the magnificent effort of charity made in their behalf. No one can say whether any one there gave a thought to the lamentable débris of humanity which expiates the crime of poverty under our eyes. Harlé generously wrote off the forty thousand francs which his house-warming cost him to their account. So in that sense they were present in his memory.

At the very beginning they had distributed all the available seats, but requests for more flowed in. The rumour that marvels were to be seen was current.

In addition to Paris, the Prince de Luques carried all of America in his train, for it is a great point to have your name cabled home in good company for newspaper readers in the New World. Besides, they had to see Harlé, the man of the hour, talk to him, congratulate him, pay homage to him in passing, and inscribe one's name in his good books, if occasion should arise. With prodigious skill they managed to give place to everyone who, for any reason, seemed to have a right to one.

It was a colossal success; there were shouts of admiration, applause, a very storm of men of the world. The Queen of Sheba and Solomon brought forth cries of praise. The two Indian tableaux, and especially the Temptation of Buddha, were no less well received. The happiest moment was when the artists mingled with the audience after the final tableau. Everyone wanted to see the marvellous costumes close at hand, to praise the designs, to touch the material, to find out if they were in style, to obtain some information concerning this queer Indian prince who looked idly at his fingernails while so rare a troupe of dancing girls were suggesting other matters for his attention. A discreet note written by Deschars for the programme told in advance everything that had to be known. But the indifference of the "forerunner," as the countess called him, was none the less the subject of the most ironic comments.

Lucienne Préban, a frigid golden idol, strolled through the respectful crowd under a mask of indifference, the enigma of her weariness. The countess—royally arrayed, darting insolent flames from her armoury of jewels—softened the effect of her theatrical pride with her captivating smile. Claudia was like an opium eater's vision of paradise. She sparkled with countless spangles and was dressed in a rainbow of gauze which revealed, perhaps a little too frankly, the still uncertain lines of youth: her dark face was lit up with twin suns. The excessive homage of the crowd followed her and enveloped her. She savoured it proudly and became drunk with its delicious fumes. She forgot everything: her uncle miserably thrown about by the crowd, prey to despair. Deschars, seeing her pass with her veils, thought of the time when, lost in a strange land, he had been happy collecting these things to adorn her whom he loved.

Both of them felt far removed from the thought which had been haunting them. In order to avoid seeing the madness of those evocative eyes, which seemed like a profanation of Claire's soul to him, Puymaufray departed, mad with despair.

"This time," he thought, "everything is lost, and it's my fault. I promised to give my life to save my child, to protect from the dirtiness of the world all that remains of the most beautiful dream of love. All I managed to do was to preach, and Claudia,

glad to get away from me, is throwing herself into the depths. What could I do? Dominic was there, taking his revenge every day. I am only a dreamer, he says. Perhaps that is what gave me my supreme happiness, just as it causes my misery to-day."

Deschars had fled, like a criminal hurrying to hide his shame.

Meantime, the joys of the fête were growing, with music, gallantry, laughter, and intrigues. Mme. du Peyrouard—a lady in waiting in the court of the Queen of Sheba—was to be seen wherever a word had to be said, and her brother, Étienne Montperrier, was not far off. It is a thankless task for an actor to be ever on the stage, but it brings its reward sooner or later. It is a mixture of work and pleasure in which he sometimes confuses life with the part he is playing.

Montperrier spied on the dancing girl at a distance and concluded from the pride in her eyes that he would profit from this triumph. Claudia, living in every fibre, drank deep draughts of this enchanted life, and walked in a dream of a royal fairyland. Feasted with all the eager looks bent upon her, hearing the hum of swarming adulation, the agitated girl said to herself: "The world is mine: I can do everything." She did not understand that the world had taken her and that her imaginary power was only the current which was carrying away her life. Alas!

how could she escape the common illusion when everything conspired for falsehood, when the true happiness, repulsed by her, was gone with the man who could do nothing for her but love her.

She neither saw nor sought to find her "uncle"—her father—bowed under the weight of the useless treasure of his love. She was struck by the brilliant desire which was masked under homage and adoration. What did she care if they were making calculations on her, since she was doing the same, and had all the advantage. "I can do everything." What was she to do with this power? She was mistress of her life. Should she let her heart speak? Trust herself to her uncle who loved her and whom she loved?—say to the gallant young man who had shown her the high road: "I am with you, let our destiny be one?" No. The only thought she had of this liberty to act was to increase, and increase forever, the extent of her domination. And the choice of a husband came down to no more than this: a computation of how much power she could demand in return for the power of her wealth. It was for this commerce that she was going to sacrifice her youth, her life, and even the hope of love.

The nobility, ruined or not, has always sought its bath of gold, even if it had to seek it in the depths. "Duchess"—thought Claudia—"that's only a name. I must have more." She looked at Montperrier,

lavishing his gifts on everybody, sought for, loved, envied, saluted for the power he would have. He was, like Harlé, a man of action. In their different spheres these two forces could agree, could combine for a development of sovereignty of which she would be the magnificent flower. Oh, it was not the ideal of the philosophers, of course! But what could her uncle or Deschars offer to compare with this magic of happy life which her father's salon made real? Who could avoid the dazzling splendour? Who could help getting dizzy?

The spectacle was beautiful enough, for the élite of Paris society was bowing down before the all-powerful Harlé, a living proof of the accuracy of Claudia's calculations. Oppert had his proper share of praise for his charity. Even after Harlé and after Baron Oppert, Montperrier shone with the beauty of a rising star. What Claudia admired above all was the great modesty of a man who was saturated with triumph.

"What is all this"—he seemed to say—"compared with what is coming?"

As the evening was ending he came up to Claudia to say good-night:

"Well, are you satisfied?" he asked. "You know that all we did was for your pleasure."

"In that case you have succeeded beyond my hopes. This will be a red-letter day in my life."

"How happy I should be if I dared to think that I might be part of that memory—no matter how slight a part."

"You *will* dare—unless I misjudge you utterly."

He looked into the very depths of her eyes.

"Mademoiselle," he answered, "I thank you for saying that. My pride will keep me from taking advantage of it. A man can't offer himself to a queen. The queen always chooses those whom she thinks fit to serve her. If some day you want me to serve you, make a sign."

He held out his hand and Claudia put hers in it—gently, as if held back by a last regret.

At the other end of the room the Comtesse de Fourchamps found her two hands imprisoned in those of Harlé, who would not let her go. She seemed very serious and Montperrier caught her last words in passing:

"No, no, my dear friend. We must wait until to-morrow. Then we will talk."

Very much at home, before a console heaped with flowers, Harlé's chief reporter was making notes:

"The great world of Parisian charity was gathered last night in the salon of M. Harlé, our illustrious confrère. The salon was decorated with the magnificence peculiar to those whose generosity rises beyond the common——"

And, pale with rage, the reporter muttered:

"If I could but tear off the masks, expose these

people naked to the world, tell what impulses brought each one here; reveal the inner truth, the awakening desires, the intrigues, the low greed, the sterility of their minds, the poverty of their hearts! Ah! what misery for the rich and what a revenge for me!"

## CHAPTER XIV

**P**UYMAUFRAY went to call on Claudia the next afternoon. He sent his name up. In reply he received this brief note:

**DEAR UNCLE:**

I haven't slept. I'll be dressed in an hour.

CLAUDIA.

Although she had not slept, Claudia was already active and a note had been despatched to Deschars with this command:

Come to-night after dinner.

She wanted, however, to set her ideas in order a little more for her uncle. The explanation to him was the only one she feared.

Puymaufrey wandered about at haphazard and spent his hour turning the dagger in his wound, telling himself a thousand times that he had done nothing, and asking himself a thousand times: "What could I do?" The supreme trial had come. A remnant of hope intensified the anguish of his

eternal question: "What words, what appeal can I find to awaken my child, to make Claire live again?"

He was at the end of the tether, exhausted with his suffering, when he came into the little white room where Claudia waited for him, herself in a state of nervous tension due to the party of the previous night and aggravated by the emotions of the battle she was fighting. Puymaufroy saw Claudia—pale, shaking, with bright eyes and a dry voice—hostile; and after a perfunctory embrace, as of gladiators in the arena, he received her direct attack.

"My dear Uncle, you probably know that I can guess what you are going to tell me. I have had the misfortune of hurting M. Deschars by announcing that we two were not made for each other. What do you expect? We don't feel alike. You know it would be useless to try to do me violence, and I do you the justice of saying that you yourself never thought of such a thing. However, I can't help knowing that you would have liked me to accept your friend. It is a great point in his favour, and I feel it. But you must allow me to bring my own personal considerations to bear; they are valuable because they are mine. So why should we quarrel?"

"But, unhappy girl, what are you saying? Have I ever quarrelled with you? Why are you on the aggressive before my first word?"

"Because I know everything you are going to say to me, or at least what you think."

"As for what I think, it doesn't seem as if you care about that. And you're mistaken about what I am going to say. I am not here to talk about Maurice. I like him very much: I admit it. He is a man. He is young, proud, and good: he believes in life and he loves you. That isn't enough, since you do not love him. I am very sorry—for you especially. I didn't give you any advice, for I knew that you would reject it: so I haven't anything to say on the subject now."

"Then tell me, frankly, what you want of me."

"Very well. I don't want you to marry M. Montperrier. That's clear, isn't it?"

"Nothing could be clearer. Now you have only to give me your reason."

"My reason is that all he wants is your money."

"Say that he wants me and my position, just as I will accept him with his situation. Don't we all count things up the same way?"

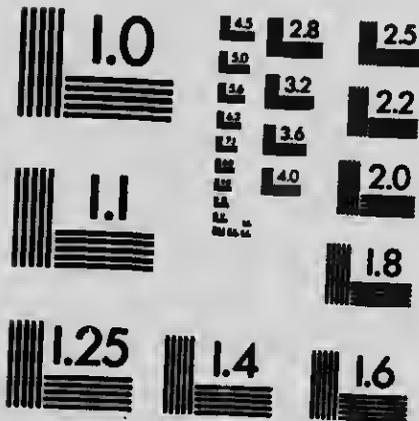
"No."

"Oh, yes. M. Deschars would marry me if I were a shepherdess. Perhaps he would be wrong. You can't spend a lifetime saying 'I love you'. If those three words were enough for happiness we should have paradise on earth; because there seems plenty of that. People must agree, I know. So must the settings of life. M. Montperrier has a great future, it seems to me. My money promises a future, too. He is young; like M. Deschars, he has his pride; I



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## THE STRONGEST

haven't seen him unkind. He says he loves me. It isn't any too unusual. Why shouldn't I marry him?"

"Because you do not love him. Because he is old in spite of all his youth; old in spirit, old in heart, exhausted with pretences, dried up with his figuring. And he cannot be good because his strength is made up of the weakness of others."

"Say, rather, that he doesn't agree with your theories."

"I have no theories. You are trying to excuse yourself in your own heart by persuading yourself that I have tried to keep you from being happy. No, my dear child. All I wanted was that you should put worldly pleasures in their proper place in your life. Alas! you have been started down the slope, and I cannot hold you back. The world attracted you. It has taken you—taken you utterly—and I see the day coming when I shall be nothing to you; because the world to which you are giving yourself irrevocably is selfish, bad, cruel, cowardly. It corrupts and perverts everything and fashions everything after its own image. You will be its victim before you understand it. Then—too late—you will call me. I shall be dead. To-day I could save you if you loved me as you used to love me—or as I love you."

"In spite of your bitter words, Uncle, you know that I love you. Do you think I haven't suffered

in resisting you? You are only wrong in one thing: you want to make me happy in spite of myself, in accordance with your philosophy. I am not you; I am *I*. Let me find my happiness in my own way."

"Claudia, the thing you call your happiness is irreparable unhappiness, the misery of a wasted life; despair, when the arms I open to you to-day shall be cold in death."

"And suppose you're mistaken?"

"And suppose *you* are? *I know*. I love you. And I see your destiny."

"I must make my destiny. I accept its consequences. Must I tell you everything? Well, I don't love Maurice Deschars the way you mean, but he is very far from displeasing to me and it will hurt me to see him go. I'm expecting him this very night. Let him—let us—both have this final chance and don't make me say the word which must not be said, yet. Everything has spoken in his favour—he himself, you, something within me—everything except this world that you detest, which he detests, but which speaks within me and which, in spite of myself, I know to be the strongest. What would you say to-morrow if you saw me unhappy because I had obeyed you, and if you had to admit that it was you who had made me unhappy?"

"All that I ask is: 'Don't marry Montperrier'."

"But I'm logical in what I do. If I sacrifice the man I might have, I must accept the better one—

better in the eyes of the world. And M. Montperrier is just that man. We will combine our forces, and rule."

"Oh, Claudia, can it be you, *you*, speaking so cynically of making a bargain in the place of love?"

"A bargain such as you witness every day and which you forgive your ancestors and your friends. You think I'm cynical? What else can I do but reason out my actions, which are the same as everybody else's? Yes, I know, the young girls of my acquaintance have a mother with whom to discuss these things. They can lower their eyes while the traffic goes on under the cover of decent formulas; they can make a novena for every act of their own will. But I have to think and act for myself. Don't you realize that it has hurt me thus to analyze myself? My cynicism is my honesty."

"I am frightened by your indifference. You are no longer yourself. It is as if Harlé had given you a different soul with all his success. If your mother were alive again at this moment you would not dare to look into her eyes. Well, then, you must hear——"

"Uncle, *please* don't speak of the dead. It is too simple. Listen to me, please. Go away without saying another word; leave me to my own devices until this evening. M. Deschars will tell you what we say. Wait until then, out of pity for me—for us. I will tell myself everything that you could tell me. Wait—wait, please."

And Puymaufray, silent, departed without knowing how or why—clinging to the hope that her heart would still rebel.

The countess's words: "We must wait until to-morrow"—spoken in the voice of a woman who yields—were like the mystic words of the coronation to Harlé. It was the supreme achievement.

A hundred times he had been on the point of throwing himself at her feet and reciting the things he had composed in his quiet hours. Each time something in her face had stopped him and prevented his declaration of love. He confided in Oppert who was not surprised, and who gave him much advice—in which Harlé thought he detected a touch of regretful jealousy. It made him happy.

The baron's advice was summed up in the word "Patience." But the amorous captain of industry was no longer willing to wait. Either he was a fool, or "We must wait until to-morrow" meant: "I love you." To love, to be loved! So he was to know that high felicity to which all men aspire and which the greatest of men have often sung only in order to give themselves the illusion of possessing it. In the evening of his life, after the enormous labours which had made him the leader of modern industry, he had found an ideal woman—the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the best loved—who understood and loved him and completed him miraculously, who

would make him the happiest, the most enviable, the strongest of the strong.

That was exactly what he was telling her at the moment when Puymaufray was miserably struggling against Claudia's logic. And the thought of making the great Harlé happy actually seemed to exalt the countess.

"Tell me, are all these things true—these beautiful things?" she demanded in an ecstatic voice. "Is it possible that a man like you——" She expressed her thought with a gentle pressure of her artistic hand, which Harlé covered with loud kisses. "Very well, then, my friend. I have decided. Whenever you wish it. I will be Mme. Harlé."

"Say that you will be the Countess Harlé. I couldn't ask the Comtesse de Fourchamps to step down in rank. With the help of Abbé Nathaniel I have been made a papal count."

"Really! You kept the secret well. Surely you don't think I care about such things!"

"No. I know you too well. But I dream of seeing you always going up, and I should have suffered to have to start with dragging you down."

"No fear of that—with you."

"There are so many fools."

"Yes, and perhaps we're mistaken in paying so much attention to them. That's what M. Montperrier told me when I advised him to revive the title his people abandoned after the Revolution. He's a

viscount, you know. Don't you think he'd be a fine husband for Claudia?"

"Viscomte de Montperrier, that isn't bad. But wouldn't his friends be sore?"

"Not if he's your son-in-law."

"That chap is going to make his way in the world."

"He's made it already—or, nearly."

"I don't like politicians much."

"Don't say that. You will like them when you are one. One fine day you'll wake up a Senator."

"Oh, I sha'n't worry! And do you think that Claudia——?"

"I know that M. Montperrier has the greatest admiration for you. I am pretty sure that this marriage would overwhelm him with happiness."

"I should think so. And Claudia?"

"Claudia is a sly little thing. I think if you won't say No——"

"I will say what you want me to say, madame."

"Always?"

"Always."

"What are you smiling at?"

"I was thinking of the young people who get married for practical reasons, as we two did before, and how we two are making a love match."

"What a great child you are! You make me blush!"

Harlé was leaving the countess to rush and tell Oppert his great news when Puymaufray was an-

nounced. He had been walking aimlessly in the streets, stricken—his brain on fire, delirious with physical and moral pain—invoking impossible aid and crying. "Let her marry this man, so long as she loves me."

What! had nothing risen in his heart during this cold torture of every fibre of his being at the hands of the cruel child who was his very life? Not a start. Not a tear. Not a tremor. It was irreparable. And he, the coward, dared not cry or rebel and impose the authority of her dead mother, commanding in her name. Alas! he had feared the fatal blow of some sarcastic remark from those bitterly drawn lips. That was why he had fled at her behest, feeling that death was coming. And now he had no other help in the world for her. Nanette, a faithful friend, could do nothing. Useless, uprooted, she had seen all her rustic diplomacy in full flight at the first onset and was caught flagrantly loving where she should have lied. It was no wonder that he, outplayed and abused, was odiously overcome by the Comtesse de Fourchamps.

The thought of that vile creature proposing salvation for Claudia at the price of his infamy rose before him. And now he could ask himself what he should have done. He had let his heart speak, just as Nanette had done, and his insulting refusal had marked the hour of his final chance. He ought to have pretended to accept, to have dissembled, gained time; and if his hand had been forced he could have

paid with his life, when once Claudia was safe. Death would come now, too—death, with the thought of Claudia lost forever.

“Well, then!” he thought. “Let the last sacrifice be made. It will not be treason to Claire. I am giving my life for what remains of her, since that is all I could do.”

And without a fixed project, without knowing exactly what he was going to say, he hastened to the Comtesse de Fourchamps.

When his name was announced she could not suppress a movement of joy. Chance had brought her her victim.

“How glad I am to see you, my friend,” she cried. “You just met Harlé going out, didn’t you?”

“No, madame. I wanted to tell you how I was touched the other day by the affectionate offers you——”

“I must stop you right there, my dear marquis. You must know that my hand is given. I am marrying Count Harlé in a month. Well, you are quite struck! Say something. Aren’t you going to congratulate me and wish me happiness?”

“A thousand pardons, madame,” stammered Puymaufroy. “Forgive my surprise. I congratulate you sincerely. And you must believe me that I congratulate Harlé above all. I didn’t know he was made a count.”

“Pull yourself together, I beg you. Otherwise my

feminine vanity will assume that you are a little vexed. You paid court to me a little—don't deny it—and I can tell you now that your homage was not altogether displeasing to me."

"You overwhelm me, madame. I confess that—  
"Not another word. I must not hear any more.

On the recent occasion, to which you have referred, when I wanted to warn you that you must be content with my friendship, your perplexity was all too apparent. I must forget it, and I will. Who would have thought that you are timid, marquis? You are sentimental. To tell the truth, I thought for a moment that there was some woman between us, some urgent memory. Please don't look so overcome. I know nothing and I haven't the time to guess. We are going to be good friends, aren't we?—as always. You know, after Harlé, I have only Claudia and you. I adore that child. Rely on me to assure her happiness. We will find each other in this mutual love. But I see that you are in a hurry to congratulate your friend."

Puymaufroy let himself be pushed out—dazed, shaken with dizziness, on the verge of madness. He walked straight ahead, hearing the sounds of the street, trying to make out what they meant, astonished that no one had anything to say to him. He found himself on a bench at the Rond-point des Champs-Élysées. Night had come. A woman came up to him and said something which he did not under-

stand. He rose, bowed to the ground, and asked her to repeat what she had said. This time, too, her words seemed senseless.

"I don't know, madame," he answered, bowing. "I don't know. I beg you to forgive me."

She fled, frightened, looking for the absent police. He fell back on his seat and in the void of his thoughts began to count the passing wagons. He said: "I'll go back after the last one has gone." The lamps came and went in the night. It seemed like a game to him. He rose with an unconscious gesture and a cabman drew up. He shouted out his address and was glad when he found himself at home.

While Puymafray was wandering about like a wounded animal, Dominic was receiving the congratulation of his friend Oppert.

"You see how wise I was when I told you to be patient."

"Yes," answered Harlé, who wanted credit for the manoeuvre, "but I knew when to smash through."

"Oh, you are a conqueror."

He had now to tell Claudia. Although he foresaw no objections, Harlé was uncomfortable.

"It's love," he thought, "that causes this modesty. If I were simply making a marriage I could tell my daughter. Happily the conditions are so perfect that Claudia will never suspect that I love the countess—love her with a real love."

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He set down to dinner, resolved to speak at the dessert. But before he opened his lips he looked at his daughter and saw that she was pale and agitated. It was not the time for confidences. He was about to question Claudia when Deschars was announced. Harlé received him with as much cordiality as his absorbing preoccupation with the countess allowed. After a few turns in the garden he asked to be excused.

The two young people went back to the bench where, a few days before, Deschars had received his sentence. A silence of fear and anguish fell between them, as of the condemned when the executioner is about to strike. Who knows what thoughts possess the head which is soon to fall. Perhaps the absurd thought that there is still time for a paralytic stroke, for a clap of thunder, or for the intervention of a God to change the course of fate. And then the axe falls and the eternal mystery continues to envelop the god who lures the living with other hopes, always new, always unfulfilled—

Between life and death Maurice waited, in the sad delirium of hoping against hope. Claudia was overwhelmed by the gravity of the occasion and felt her throat choking as though the effort to speak must end in sobs. She thought of escaping. If Deschars had had courage to assail his fate, he might have released all her pent-up emotions. What a future depended on the moment. Motionless, wear-

ied, overcome by a day of storms, he sat and watched the moths flying into the quivering candlelight. Without a movement, without a thought, he waited.

Finally Claudia mastered herself and spoke:

"You were very good to come," she said in a scarcely audible voice. "No matter how it may hurt us both, you must hear me again. If I were wrong I should have let you judge me by our last conversation. But I haven't the courage. I cannot resign myself to live misunderstood——"

"I understand you, since I love you," he answered. "I understand you because I know you are the victim of evil suggestions around you, because it is your father and not yourself speaking. I understand you better than you do. It is because of your weakness, because you don't trust your own power that you are trying to find refuge in extremes. Knowing nothing of life, but thinking that you know, you are violently closing your heart against your wonderful godfather; you are not saying what you really think, and you are not following the commands of your own heart!"

"No," declared Claudia. "You are judging me too highly. Really I am two persons, and I cannot understand myself. There were times when I might have given you my hand, gladly—and have been happy in your way of happiness. They opened up to me a different kind of life. My millions are throwing me into the arms of M. Montperrier whom I do

not love. Heaven knows how I shall feel toward him to-morrow." But at his side I shall have an opportunity to find those gratifications of pride for which I am sacrificing love. These aren't new things. Only I am going into the world with open eyes. I am not forced. I follow the road which has been marked out for me, because I haven't the power to make another way for myself. Despise me for that weakness. Hate me for the evil I am doing you. But pity me for the sufferings I undergo."

"If you really are suffering, save yourself, I beseech you. There is still time. Lift up your head and decide for yourself. Save yourself, save us both. Don't kill all the happiness of your life without even the excuse of ignorance."

"It is too late. My fate is sealed. To-morrow I would fall back. If my decision were not irrevocable could I have spoken to you as I did the other day? Could I have held out against the kindness of my uncle this morning? Could I, even in this shameful hour, feel myself incapable of withdrawing a single one of my wicked words? It is better for you and for me to suffer this hour of pain than to torture each other for a lifetime." Then, after a brief silence: "To-morrow," she added, "I will acquaint M. Montperrier with his happiness. I wanted to see you again first: I myself don't know why. Perhaps to test myself finally. My tortures are cruel, I admit. But my decision stands. So

go, without saying adieu, without looking back. Go dream your dream over the surface of the earth. Perhaps you will find someone worthy to dream it with you. You will forget. Perhaps it will be my punishment to remember, some day."

He tried to kiss the hand she held out to him. But Claudia snatched it away, as if burned by the tears which came before the touch of his lips.

"No," she said. "I am not worthy of your regrets. Go, quickly."

But when he started, she stopped him with a resolute gesture.

"I beg you, not a word. Be generous to the end. I couldn't change, and you would only add to my sorrow. Good-bye. Something of us is being destroyed, and it is I who have willed it. Forgive me—and pity me. You see that I do not love you."

She fled toward the salon. Deschars stood vacantly listening to her footsteps on the sand, waiting for her to return, searching some decision in himself to redeem the final defeat he had suffered, and finding nothing but a stricken will. A noise startled him. He thought he heard Harlé, and hastened toward the street. From her window Claudia saw him go, but no sign escaped her to call back the love she was banishing from her life.

As the gate shut heavily on her dead past she trembled and with drawn face ran to the console

where a secret was hidden. She pressed the spring, took out a little box of shell and gold, and unlocked it. Then she undressed in feverish haste.

Finally, when she was ready for bed, Claudia sat down in the glow of the lamp, took a tiny golden instrument from the box—a mysterious gift from the countess—filled it with morphine and, for the first time, pressed the needle in. . . .

Meantime Deschars was slowly returning to the hotel where Puymaufray, in despair, awaited him. Hopeless himself, Deschars ungratefully forgot his friend, whose anguish he could not fathom.

At the door Nanette reminded him.

"My dear Nanette," he said in an indistinct voice, "please tell the marquis that I am dying of weariness and that I will see him to-morrow."

He need not have wasted words. From his tone Nanette divined the disaster.

"It went badly," she told Puymaufray when she returned. "It's easy to surmise these things with a man like Maurice. He'll see you to-morrow. We must try to console him. But we still have your child to save. And you are still asking and scolding when you have the right to command."

Thus quarrelling with him she distracted his thoughts from Maurice's disaster, to summon his forces for the last attempt at salvation.

"You are right," he said, finally. "I have recoiled

too long from the decisive words. This time, I swear to you, she will hear me."

Meanwhile, Deschars in his room tramped the floor from one wall to the other, his face drawn with anguish, trying to recall something of his will-power. In the morning he was resolved, and wrote this brief note:

To M. LE MARQUIS DE PUYMAUFRAY:

Forgive me for leaving without seeing you again. What could I say, which would not hurt you?

Last night I was given these definite words: "I do not love you." It is enough.

I am hurrying to get out of the way. Do you continue to love her, since you have the right. I am going to take up my useless wanderings at hazard. I will write you one day.

I greet you with an ever-increasing affection.

MAURICE.

Two hours later he was en route for Marseilles.

## CHAPTER XV

**A**T BREAKFAST next day Claudia and Harlé regarded each other in silence. He was nervously seeking a chance to speak, preoccupied only with his efforts to conceal, under the cloak of a marriage of convenience, the secret intoxication of his marriage for love. Claudia was still affected by the morphine and was delighting in the poisonous charm of a delicious stupor. She expected her father to ask questions and, guessing that they would be about Montperrier, decided that it might be in good taste to express some leaning toward her future husband.

When he had made sure of his voice by a preliminary cough, Harlé began his discourse:

"I have a great piece of news for you, little one. I have been given the title of count. The Holy Father has graciously granted me this favour, which I have never sought. As you know, I am far above these vanities. I suppose they wanted to reward me for the services rendered to the charitable institutions of Ste. Radegonde and to assure the good will of the *Universal Daily* toward the good cause. I couldn't have declined this honour without insulting

the Holy See. So I am a count. In view of the position I have acquired, it is a bagatelle. I need no one and everyone needs me. But look! One of these days you'll go away on the arm of some fine husband, when I shall have to remain here in this palace alone. That's very sad to think about. So you won't be surprised to hear that I have been entertaining the notion of providing myself with a new family—always taking care not to harm your interest or offend your feelings."

"Papa, don't say another word. You are marrying the Comtesse de Fourchamps."

"I am delighted that you guessed it! That proves that everything is for the best in the world, since, without my saying a word to any one——"

"Oh, come, Papa, you are joking. I have eyes. You are madly in love with her."

Harlé blushed to his ears.

"What's that you say? The Comtesse de Fourchamps is our best friend. She wanted to watch over your *début* into society. She has overwhelmed you with her affectionate care, with her tenderness, and I have pledged her my infinite gratitude for this inestimable service. I admire her. So does all Paris. But that doesn't justify your credulity. I must have a woman's aid in the political career on which I am embarking. You will be nearer the truth if you say that I am ambitious. You must admit that I couldn't find a happier assistant——"

"Whatever you say, Papa. A little sentimentality doesn't go badly at your age. The countess has been very good to me. I rejoice in whatever feelings you have which will bring her closer to us. I foresaw this result of your ambitions—as you call them—long ago. All the conveniences are present, and if your heart is touched a little, I shall not betray you."

Harlé lowered his eyes, timid at the very mention of the word love.

"And, since we're talking about such things——" Claudia resumed.

She did not have time to finish. A gust of wind flung the door open and in a moment Claudia was in the arms of the countess.

"My dear, my dear, how happy I am! You really want me for your mamma?"

They broke into laughter shaken with restrained emotion: they embraced and they cried, with real tears.

Harlé was in raptures. His eyes wet with emotion, he drained the cup of happiness. He wanted to speak but could say nothing but "Oh!"—which, to him, seemed to be sublimely eloquent. Finally, after a speech which was all pantomime, he kissed the little white glove which fluttered on Claudia's shoulder, and they all tried to calm down.

"You know, my dear child," said the countess, "that your father and I want nothing except to make you happy."

"How could I doubt that?" asked Claudia, calmly watching the flood of these excessive emotions. "I can see in your eyes that you have something to tell me already."

"Clever little thing! You want to make me speak in spite of myself and won't give me the pleasure of a surprise. All right. If your father permits me I shall speak and claim my rights as a mother from this happy day."

"Madame," answered Harlé, solemnly, "you may say whatever you wish."

"Very well, my dears. I have just had a visit from M. Montperrier who tells me that the beauty of Mlle. Claudia Harlé——"

"Spare us the prologue, please," interposed Claudia. "I made my decision yesterday and I see that we are going to start our family off in full agreement. What have you to say, father?"

"Oh, it's very simple. My opinion is the same as the countess's."

"Well, my opinion is that I am struck with the advantages of this union if the inclinations of our daughter——"

"Assume that the feeling of *your daughter* are all that you can wish."

"I am delighted," answered the countess. "The old nobility is played out. I can say that without danger. A man like your father is destined by his genius to set great modern activities astir. Poli-

## THE STRONGEST

tics must have him. Look among the careers of the present-day politicians and find one who is richer in acquirements or more happy in his hopes than Montperrier. What could we wish for you, child, greater than the noble joy of power, which used to be the prerogative of royalty and which is now logically reserved for—

"The strongest," interjected Harlé.

"That is too modest," observed the countess.

"Say, rather: 'the most deserving'."

"Same thing. Well, child, what do you say?"

"Nothing. In principle, I approve."

"I will only remark," Harlé continued, "that as M. Montperrier hasn't a penny we must grant him nothing in the settlement. He must be held by his wife. Otherwise I know what would happen."

"I think that is an absolutely indispensable condition," said Claudia.

"M. Montperrier," the countess declared, gravely, "is the most unselfish man in the world. He might accept. He would never ask."

"He will have nothing," Harlé concluded. His habitual decisiveness asserted itself in this connection.

"Before I give my last word I want a five-minute interview with M. Montperrier," suggested Claudia.

"Just as you wish, little one. I approve. There's always something to say."

"Why, it's splendid," cried the countess, with a

burst of laughter. "I have just left M. Montperrier downstairs in my carriage."

A few minutes later Étienne Montperrier was ushered into the salon and was met by the family.

"Ah! so it's you, you sly one, who dares ask for the hand of my child," shouted Harlé, happily.

"Well, I love audacity. But I have nothing to say; Claudia is mistress of herself. She will decide, and I am willing to let you plead your cause. Be eloquent. Good luck to the young."

On that, Harlé went off with the countess, leaving the two lovers face to face.

"Mademoiselle," began Montperrier, very pale, "my fate is in your hands. I can confess to you now that, apart from the questions of advantages—which we cannot pretend to ignore without hypocrisy—my admiration for your character and—may I add?—the effect of your beauty on me, prevent me from speaking as I should speak."

"I am very glad of that, monsieur. For it seems to me that we have room just now only for the eloquence of facts."

"However, you must believe that love——"

"Quite. We have a lifetime in which to try to agree on that subject. I wanted this talk in order to make clear my conditions. We must not try to deceive each other. You love me, which is proper enough, and you do not displease me. When everything else is settled, that is enough. I would say

that I propose to remain mistress of myself if that be compatible with marriage. At the least I have resolved to protect everything I can from the possibility of eventual tyranny. That is why I wanted you to hear from my own lips, to-day, that my duties are to be measured exactly by yours. My father intends to grant you nothing in the settlement; and if he didn't want that, I would."

"I have given so many proofs of disinterested——"

"I couldn't doubt them. I am speaking this way now, regretfully, in order to inform you fully of the state of my feelings, to which your resolutions for the future must bow."

"And I thank you for it, mademoiselle. Since we are speaking with equal frankness, would you not let me say that it might be advisable, in our common interest, to keep up the social authority necessary in my position—for me to be so placed that I would be protected against malicious remarks?"

"Surely you don't think so! You would be giving yourself over to all sorts of slanders that way. They would say that we had made a money bargain. No. You see in me a will not inferior to your own. That is a guaranty of the future. Have confidence in me. You have my complete social fidelity, as I have yours. That answers for everything. But I consent to let you try to make people love you, and I hope you want to do that."

"My only desire is to please you in everything."

"Well, then, our fate is decided. If necessary I will remind you of the conditions of our agreement."

"It will not be necessary. I will keep the details fresh in my memory."

He advanced toward her with outstretched hand. She stopped him with a gesture and, putting aside the portière, summoned her father.

Then, under the tender eyes of the Comtesse de Fourchamps and the flamboyant ardour of M. Harlé, burning with love, the two young people coldly sealed their pact with a gesture of the utmost propriety, each thinking of the ingenious calculation, the triumph of their day, to be paid with avenging to-morrows.

"I will hold him," Claudia said to herself. "He will be in my hands."

"I will have my revenge," thought Montperrier, dully annoyed.

"Be happy, my children," exclaimed Harlé, ravished by the eyes of the countess.

Puymaufroy read Deschars's note and without a word handed it to Nanette. She deciphered it, slowly. After a silence she said:

"He did the right thing by going away. He didn't have the strength for this game. All our misfortune comes from counting on him, while he was expecting us to give him Claudia. You see, M'sieur Henri, that all the young people of to-day, even when

they are good, are good for nothing. That's all you can say."

"And I? I haven't much to be proud of!"

"Because you sit here with your arms folded watching other people strike while the iron is hot. But this time you have promised me to speak out the way you should. Otherwise, everything is over."

"Claudia will hear me. I have promised."

Puymaufroy rang at the door of Harlé's house precisely at the moment when Claudia, her hand in Montperrier's, was looking with an ironic stare at the countess, timid and modest, and at her father, with his burning eyes.

When she heard Henri's name, Claudia cried out and disappeared.

"Show M. le marquis into my study," growled Harlé, furious at the encounter.

"I'll take M. Montperrier with me," said the countess. "It isn't desirable that the marquis should see me. He had, if I'm not mistaken, plans for Claudia and for someone else, which do not agree with what has come to pass. Let us not annoy him with our happiness."

"I will come to see you presently," said Harlé.

"Good. I will wait for you."

The moment the carriage passed through the gate the countess turned to Montperrier.

"Well?" she demanded, triumphantly.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," answered

Montperrier. "But it seems I shall have the humiliation of depending upon my wife."

"Claudia is insuring herself against human ingratitude. Don't go around talking of these difficulties. Remember that I will always be your friend."

At bottom the countess was not at all displeased to hold the reins over young Montperrier, who would, undoubtedly, have to feel the bit some day. He saw through her attitude and—forgetful of services rendered—grew enraged.

Meanwhile Harlé, touched to the quick by the countess's allusion to Puymaufroy's rivalry, greeted him brusquely and took up a telegram, which a servant brought in at the same moment. He opened it, hoping to find in it an excuse for his bad humour—a hope that was more than gratified.

"This is too much!" he shouted, with an evil look. "Ste. Radegonde is out on strike. For a month my engineer has been talking about 'discontent' and 'conferences.' He seemed to think that something had to be done. I put it off: I had so many things to keep me busy here. And now it's over. I will yield nothing."

"I wanted to talk to you about that," said Puymaufroy. "I have just had a letter from Jean Quété. He says that the new machines keep the men much closer to the job all the time and tire them out much more quickly. And he says that as the

output is so much greater they have been asking for a rise in wages but in vain."

"I didn't refuse. I postponed it. It isn't so startling that I shouldn't be in a hurry to diminish my profits."

"It seems that your men were more in a hurry to get higher wages for more work. They got tired of waiting, and now they're striking."

"Yes. But they've chosen the worst possible way. Now I can't give in. I should seem to be in the wrong. To-morrow they will ask for Heaven knows what. They must go back first!"

"But you yourself admit that you ought to have settled the question sooner. Surely you don't want to drive these people mad simply out of obstinacy?"

"Mad? I'd like to see that! I tell you they must go back first! Let them resume work; then I'll see."

"Where's Claudia?"

"She's gone out. We're going to the opera to-night with the Comtesse de Fourchamps and M. Montperrier. If you care to join us——"

"No. Will you tell Claudia that I will see her to-morrow?"

"Surely. She'll expect you after lunch. I'm going down to the Cours Beauvau. I must see the Minister of the Interior at once to put an end to my strike. Damn those people! I'm going to sack the leaders."

He dismissed Puymaufroy and, writing a burning note to the countess, hastened down to the ministry.

Puymaufroy stopped at the first telegraph office and wired Jean Quété:

Give in. Everything will be arranged—PUYMAUFRAY.

Then—burdened with himself, not knowing where to go, he wandered toward the Bois in the vague hope of finding Claudia. He took the Avenue de la Grande Armée, to avoid bores, and was approaching the pavillon d' Armenonville when the sight of a crowd diverted him.

He walked along, with his eyes on the ground. Without knowing how he got there, he found himself between the little lake and the pine trees near Neuilly. Suddenly a familiar voice made him raise his head. Prince de Luques and Mélanie were two paces ahead of him, engaged in an intimate conversation. He tried to escape, but at the sound of his steps the prince had turned.

"Ha, it's you," he cried. "What are you doing here?"

"The same as you. I'm taking a walk," answered Henri, saluting the young woman.

"My dear child, I present to you my old friend, M. le Marquis de Puymaufroy!"

"Monsieur, I am very happy to know you," said Mélanie. "I have often heard about you. Pardon me, you see me somewhat nervous. I have been

quarrelling with the prince. Do me the favour of lecturing him."

"Come, come, dear. What are you saying?"

"I am simply calling the Marquis de Puymaufroy to my assistance. I want him to judge between us."

"Silence!" exclaimed the prince, out of patience.

"No, no. You shall not stop me from talking." Then, to Puymaufroy: "The prince launched me, didn't he? Everybody in Paris knows that. He did me two great favours. He showed me that virtue was out of place for a pretty girl and offered me his services. Well, I accepted; and I may tell you that the arrangement was purely platonic on both sides. That was what decided me on my course: the originality of the love of art."

The prince was cutting a deplorable figure.

"Only," continued Mélanie, "right after the visit to Morgan, which was the prince's idea—and for which I thank him because it started me off at the top, didn't it?—he began to try to play the lover! And, what's more ridiculous still, he became jealous. Really it is too funny. I laughed a whole day. And now he hounds me; he compromises me; he follows me—even into this secluded spot—because he saw me exchange a couple of words with M. Montperrier. I refused to tell him what we said and why I appeared so satisfied. I am discreet, that's all."

Turning to the prince she added: "But now I have no further need to be secretive, since M. le Marquis

de Puymaufray is going to tell you the news himself. M. Montperrier announced to me his engagement to M. le marquis's ward."

"My ward?" cried Henri, growing pale.

"Your ward, or your godchild; which is it?" asked Mélanie. "Mlle. Claudia Harlé, anyhow. You brought her up, didn't you? I want to be one of the first to congratulate you. They say that Mlle. Harlé has millions. Take my word for it that M. Montperrier is worthy of her."

Without a word Puymaufray saluted hastily and fled, like a hunted beast. Until night he walked, incapable of concentrated thought. Then a reaction set in and he went home boiling with rage. Nanette saw him pass but she could not see his face, and all night long she watched his locked door, thinking that whatever had happened, a decision would be made on the morrow.

In the morning a telegram came from Jean Quété. It ran:

They would not believe me. They have waited too long. Besides, arrival of troops caused anger. Uproar last night. Windows broken, arrests. Cannot hold back any longer.

"I will answer it to-night," said Henri, giving the blue slip to Nanette.

He looked at the clock. All night long, in his dis-

tress, he had listened to the ticking of the minutes, marking the last halt before the final battle. In vain had he tried to hurry them. The chain of minutes dragged by him wearily. All his life passed before him in review: his wildly wasted youth, his love, the lightning flash of happiness, and the thunderclap that destroyed his superhuman bliss; and then the vision of Claire, living again in the eyes of their daughter, the hope renewed . . . to be crushed in despair. He had loved the ungrateful child too well. He had been afraid to dare her to her face. But what now? Claudia, a rebel against the soul of Claire, was Claudia no more. He had no fear of speaking now, since he expected nothing but death.

They were just finishing lunch when Henri reached Harlé's house. Outwardly he seemed calm. But the contracted brows, the fixed eye, and the tightened mouth bespoke immovable resolve. Harlé, very sombre, entered with Claudia.

"Well, you're satisfied now, I suppose," exclaimed Harlé—"now that your theories are in action. The strikers have tried to destroy Ste. Radegonde. I don't know what would have happened if it hadn't been for the troops."

"I have just received a wire saying that there were only some windows smashed. That isn't serious."

"So you're on the side of Revolution. I should have known that."

"Don't talk nonsense. You know how it will end."

"Yes, I know. Everybody is going back to work, and quickly. I say so. The minister gave me assurances. The incredible thing is that they hesitated at first to send troops. Montperrier convinced them quickly. Ha! their daring me! They'll see. They'll know whom they're dealing with. Yesterday I would have made concessions if they had thrown themselves on my generosity. To-day: nothing. And let them not ask. I'll *lower* their wages."

"Really, you are mad! Yesterday you admitted that you were wrong because you didn't accept the agreement they proposed. And to-day, because you are sure of yourself with the troops there, you are going to maintain a régime which you yourself have condemned."

"Do you think it's for a few francs?"

"After all, you do not despise them—those few francs—although you admit they aren't yours by right."

"It isn't I. You don't understand. Revolution is breaking out and we must keep it under. What is that to you?—you who have never worked and who find it easy to criticize those that have. I represent the necessary order. All of society is interested in my victory over the strikers. That is why the Government put the army at my disposal. What! At the very moment when I am starting a great enter-

prise which consolidates the existing order, basing it on the tacit consent of the masses, shall I see my authority and my prestige compromised because a few hotheads——”

“Really, you couldn’t stand that,” interjected Claudia in a provoking voice.

“You, too!” exclaimed Puymaufroy. (Claudia’s eyes dropped, rebelliously.) “That you should have come to this!”

“Yes; she, too,” shouted Harlé, violently. “And all sensible people, who defend what they have and so defend everybody’s possessions. Claudia doesn’t come up to the heights of my views, perhaps, but she understands that it is a fight for her side against a crowd of malefactors. My greatness—since we must speak of it—is hers, obviously. There would be no need for me to remind you of it if you really loved her as you pretend. By thirty years of work I have brought her to the top of the social ladder. And to-morrow the bandits will have the better of me!”

“No,” said Claudia, with a shake of her head. “They won’t. I will be as good to the unfortunate as you want, but father is right and I am on his side. We must be the masters.”

“Yes, the masters,” hissed Harlé, savagely. “I’ll smash those brawlers; I’ll break ’em up. And if they think they’ll escape by their secret plans, I’ll show them how to lie.”

Puymaufroy was just about to answer, contemptu-

ously, when the door opened. An engineer from Ste. Radegonde was asking to see Harlé.

"Show him in," Harlé commanded.

"Monsieur," said the arrival, "there is bad news at the ministry. The situation is worse this morning. A mob formed, shouting. Women got mixed up in it. They began to make threats. The Secretary of the Ministry is following me. He will tell you the instructions sent down by the Ministry of War."

"Very well. I'll tell him what to do," growled Harlé. "There *are* no instructions. They have to act. Otherwise we shall be the laughing stock of Paris to-morrow. My power is crumbling away at the very moment of my triumph. My envious enemies will let loose all their fury against me. We shall be flung aside. My daughter, for whom I was preparing a regal life—and I——"

"Father," gasped Claudia, grown suddenly pale, "you must see the minister and speak to him and make him do his duty. He must protect us. We must defend ourselves. You can't let Ste. Radegonde be ransacked by savages. If the revolt won there it would be the end of everything. It's impossible. The soldiers won't let themselves be insulted. They have their weapons——"

Henri sprang toward her.

"Say that again!" he shouted, trembling with anger. "Say that again!"

She was silent.

Harlé—preoccupied with his decisions—had taken the caller into his study.

Claudia and Henri were left alone for the merciless duel, and their eyes flashed like blades crossing in mid-air. Claudia was on the defensive, and she faced Henri's attack without flinching.

"So you, you have spoken that way," he said, approaching her. "You, my daughter!"

"Yes; I, your *god-daughter*," corrected Claudia, coldly.

"Miserable child; must men be killed for you now? Men who may be wrong but who may have reasons for being wrong. . . . And you give the word to fire!"

"A word escaped me. I don't think it has killed any one."

"Don't you? I got the blow here, in my heart; and the wound will never close. What do you care in your new life? Haven't you reduced me to the point where I must learn of your engagement from *M. Lélanie*, whom I found quarrelling with Prince de Luques about M. Montperrier himself?"

"In Paris you can't keep a secret. I didn't see you yesterday."

"Enough of lies. To-day we must have the truth between us. I wanted to save you. I couldn't. It is probably my fault. The others were too strong for me. I needed your help. Now it is ended.

But you must know what you are going to lose. I loved you. I love you enough now not to curse you when you strike the dagger into me. I have loved you from the day you were born. I loved you for yourself. I loved you for your mother. Do not say a word. I do not want you to touch that memory of mine. It wasn't a 'kind of love' that I gave you. It was love itself. I followed your footsteps——”

“You were always reproaching me for it, Uncle——”

“There was room for reproaches! I followed you—do you hear?—hour by hour. I saw your soul begin to grow, and my only desire was that you should be your mother over again; your mother whom you are going to banish forever. Nothing stopped me; nothing tired me. I could not say 'I want' because I had no law but love on my side. I spoke. What more could I have done? I couldn't set up as an example. My life had been a failure. I was to find my punishment in you. I wasted my life and yet your mother was able to turn it into a new path. How easy it seemed to open your heart to the noble ideals which should have been your heritage. That was what I tried to do. In order to be loved, I assumed that you loved and for twenty years I kept up the pretence. And in spite of everything, in spite of yourself, I remained faithful to you.”

"But, Uncle, why did you burden yourself? Surely this was my father's duty."

"And your mother's, too. I received from her the duty of love which, to-day, I must fulfil."

"You have told me this a hundred times. But you spoke of my mother; it was my father who made me happy."

"I wanted you to be happy through love, your father wanted you to be happy by ruling over others. I told you to love. The world tempted you with selfishness and your father was an accomplice. The world and your father were the strongest."

"Why don't you say that you wanted to make me like yourself—with good intentions? I admit. Weak as I was, I tried to obey you. I couldn't. All you did was to make it harder for me to go my way, to follow my father. My sufferings and my tears are due to you. I owe to my father nothing but happiness—my father whom you are accusing behind his back."

"Silence! You do not know what you are saying. With a word I could bring down your castle in the air. I came here to compel you to obey, to command in the name of your mother, when your abominable words——"

"I did not know her. No one has the right to the name now except my father's wife."

Puymaufray staggered under the blow, his hands clutching the air.

"The Comtesse de Fourchamps your mother!" he cried. "You! You dare to disown her! For your blasphemy may you— - No! I will not say it. Her voice! Her voice!"

Suddenly, roughly, he pointed at Claudia and said: "You have willed it. The tomb is going to open."

And without knowing what he was going to do, he went to Harlé's study. Harlé was about to go out.

"Wait!" said Puymaufroy, with authority. "I must speak to you."

Harlé, anxious to get away, returned to the study without a word.

"I have just said good-bye to Claudia," Henri began. "'Good-bye,' you understand?"

Dominic nodded. "Well?" he queried.

"Well? Nothing. I wanted to talk to her about her mother, who, on the threshold of death, asked me to watch over her. You were absent then——"

"Yes. But I am here now, and we do not need any help to get along. As for Claudia's mother, she was mad."

At the word, Puymaufroy strode forward, furiously.

"I forbid you to insult Claire," he said in a low voice.

"'Claire?'" cried Dominic, stupefied. "What do you say? Who gives you the right——?"

"I say that I forbid you to insult Claire," repeated Puymaufroy, menacingly. Listen. The supreme

moment has come. I despise you and you hate me. But I know that there are some things so low that you would not do them. Will you say, for me, whether you think I am capable of dishonouring my own name by a lie, the most odious of lies?"

"No," said the other, calming himself with an effort. "Go on. Speak. I will believe you."

"Then let the blow fall. Claudia is my daughter!"

Harlé felt a cloud settle before his eyes. Then, suddenly freed, he gasped: "What are you saying? You are mad. You are insulting the dead. You are a coward. You lie!"

Henri stood still, only raising his hand to call Heaven to testify. "On my name and on my honour, by all that I respect and all that I believe in, I swear that Claudia is my daughter—the child born of me, Henri de Puymaufroy, and of Claire Mornand, whom you bought as a business speculation and who was my wife by the law of Love."

Harlé fell into a chair, overcome. Hiding his head in his hands he remained silent, convulsed with fury. To think that he had been fooled, and precisely by those whom he despised! He, the strong man, mocked by the weak! His anger, at bottom, rose against himself.

Henri—livid of face and stiff, with arms folded—waited. Finally the explosion came. The blood had rushed to Harlé face; his eyes were starting from their sockets, as he rose in a fit of rage:

"And why do you tell me that now? Because it is too late for me to be revenged! Twenty years of falsehood and then one word of truth when you are sure of escaping punishment! What made you speak? Tell me if you dare! Ah! the marriage with Montperrier. You don't approve, eh? It's not the sort of thing you want. So you say to yourself, 'Since she will not yield, I will take her back and force her to obey.' Well?—and what about my millions? What are you going to do about them, now? Or rather what would you have done if you hadn't thought of this new idea? You didn't think of them, did you? You are so unselfish! However, even if my wife was yours—as you have just explained—my money is my own! I won it by my work! I didn't steal it from you! So why do you want to steal it from me?"

"That is one insult which does not touch me. Events have taken us both by surprise! I had to choose between killing the mother and accepting a lie. I took the risk."

"It isn't true. You wanted to steal my money for your daughter. And you made her an accomplice in your infamy! Talk to me about the puritans who disapprove of us! How do you dare to look into my face?"

"Because my conscience is clear."

"Your conscience? You dare to speak the word when I find you robbing my safe? If Claudia had

been led away by your hypocrisy and had married Deschars you would have let her use my money, you thief—you thief!”

His voice trembled with fury. The thought of his money being stolen drew a froth on to his lips. He wanted blood and tried to find a word for a dagger.

Henri had not made a move. “Nothing but money,” he said, in a low, scornful voice. “You are viler than I thought. You know that if I had been able to speak—— Wasn’t it enough to leave my child with you——”

“But Claudia didn’t want it,” Harlé snarled, unheeding. “Ah, the dear child who will avenge me. For she is my child now. Ah! You stole my wife, whom I did not love. Well, how about it? I am taking your daughter whom you do love! And I will never give her back. There must be a God for this sweet revenge! You sneaked up and ravished the honour of my house! And all that remains of your cursed house I shall break up in full daylight. There are reprisals for you! And I did it without knowing it, by a miracle of Providence! The power of work is so great that it restores everything, without our knowing it, or talking about it. How happy I would have been to take my revenge twenty years ago, in every hour of my honesty, in every hour of your infamous life! I thought it was ambition; but it was revenge! And now all the pleasures I missed are giving me an immense joy! You stole my money

and my money is stealing your child. It gave her another soul: a better soul, which repudiates you. Go, go tell her you are her father, if you can—without dying of shame at her feet. Open your arms to her, ask her to come back to you! She will not believe you! She will drive you off as I am about to drive you out of this house. And do you know why? Because she would not—could not—believe you. Because I have made the child of my millions out of your child. And she could no more separate herself from those millions than could the millions separate themselves from her! The daughter of your crime has become the daughter of my gold! She needs me, not you, for her life—the life that I prepared in spite of you. Now, go. Go back to your shame, philosopher; back to the ruined witnesses of your shame. I am driving you out. Go!”

“No,” retorted Henri, very quietly. “It is not yet time. Let the mud of your soul fall back on you. I know my faults. They are grave. I have been punished for them by the life I have endured. But there is someone whom I must speak of before you.”

“My wife? I admire you. You haven’t a spark of shame left. You dare to judge between her and me! You, the criminal, judging me, the victim of the crime! And through her, your accomplice, a wretched——”

The insult was not spoken. Like a wild beast, mad with blood, Puymaufray leaped upon Harlé

with a roar. If Dominic had not retreated he would have been killed. All that Henri realized was the need to murder before the outrage was given words. He was like a man in the agony of death, and Harlé recoiled.

"You are afraid," said Henri, mastering himself. "Good. Now listen to me. Be silent, for I have sworn that I will kill you if you open your lips. There is only one thief here and it is you. You stole the spirit of Claire, whose name I forbid you to speak again. Yes; her soul, her youth, her candour, her beauty, in addition to her money, which you coveted—you stole all these for the protection you swore to give them. And when you failed to find the few francs which you had expected, you made yourself the executioner of her soul. You revenged yourself, with all your futile vileness, on the innocent. You took pleasure in torturing her, and now you are surprised that when the avenger came your victim was taken from you. What I took from you was not *your* property—never had been. You must know that! A woman gives herself. I must tell it to you. A transaction in money has no hold over her! What do you care? You followed your dream of money for money's sake, crushing the weak, and giving as your only reason the fact that you were the strongest. Well, it is not true. You are the weakest, you fool—the smallest, nothing. I tell it to you in the hour of your triumph. From to-

day you will fall. We are all avengers, one against the other. I am through with the long sufferings of my expiation. Thanks to you I find myself again. I was powerless in the battle—hesitating, afraid. I wanted, at all cost, to save Claudia. And now I am standing before you—you who call yourself the conqueror and me the conquered—and I say: 'You have still to pay for your victory. You are marrying the Comtesse de Fourchamps. If I were low enough, what worse thing could I dream for my revenge? You are stealing Claudia, and you boast of it. Haven't I told you that she is my daughter and Claire's daughter? Our blood will reassert itself, be well assured. I leave her in your hands because in her madness she desires it. She wants it, but she is unhappy already. She wept. I heard the groans of remorse rising in her heart. She has set her heart against me, against everyone. But to-morrow, blessed suffering will bring her back to me, her father. I will tell her everything then. And I will forgive her and shall be forgiven. You have made me pity. Go on dragging out your lies about your gilded miseries. I have found out what is the greatest thing in life. I have lived for love. Now I will live for forgiveness.'

## EPILOGUE

IN THE solitude of his ancient house, Henri de Puymafray traverses his thoughts. They are thoughts of defeat . . . and of victory. Some pride of love gives this vanquished soul the brave hope that there can be no victory against love. The heat of the battle against the master of Claire, who became the master of Claudia, is dissipated in the calm peace of the soil. Now that Claudia is far away, Claire has returned, Claire who by her own strength will bring Claudia back in time. Life, through suffering, will bring Claudia back to love.

Weakened by the struggle, he gained strength to meet contrary fortune. Claudia is already on the way to forgiveness, en route for the great return to him. Alas! the way is long and hard, and perhaps he will be dead before the day. But he will die with open arms. And even if Claudia is not to return, may she be forgiven. Love does not measure its strength against the weakness of the strongest.

Spring has come. The earth is reawakened, flourishing. Everything feels the thrill of life and bears blossom and bud and flower and fruit in an

ecstasy of love. The earth sings itself in the songs of its birds. It is Paradise regained.

At nightfall Henri de Puymaufray turns from this spectacle of life and dreams of his dead.

Nanette, old now, is with him, in perfect friendship, no less admirable, perhaps, than perfect love.

Jean Quété, discharged from the factory because he pleaded the cause of the workers, repudiated by his companions for the disaster of the strike, is on his way to Paris. Before he leaves he stops in at the château.

"Monsieur Henri," says Jean, "you have come back to us with eyes which we do not like. We said they would treat you badly out there. The strongest have to tear their own hearts out first in order to become the strongest. They will not always be the strongest. The weakest will avenge you."

"My friend Jean," answered Henri, "your vengeance will not waken me from the sleep of death. I am already more avenged than need be. What are human disasters, if the goodness of the future is won by them? There must be soldiers dying and filling the trench before the victorious assault. With wasted lives and in sorrow, the genius of living humanity is created!"

THE END



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